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Allegiances

ThunderClan

Leader- Beetlestar: Light tortoiseshell tom with dull yellow eyes

Deputy- Darkfang: Dark gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Medicine cat- Dustynose: Light brown she-cat with light green eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Echopaw: Pure white she-cat with orange eyes

Warriors

Spottedshine: Speckled white tom with light green eyes

Badgerstorm: Speckled white she-cat with hazel eyes

Minnowwind: Pure white she-cat with orange eyes and tufted ears

Scarredbelly: Dusty gray tabby tom with sharp stripes, a light face mask, and orange eyes

Wildrapid: Creamy white tom with ginger patches and sharp green eyes

Orchidfall: Red tabby tom with white paws, chin, and belly with green eyes

Cursedblood: Pale-gray tabby tom with a white underbelly, orange eyes, and lighter paws

Venombranch: Gray tabby she-cat with light green eyes

Dawnslash: White and silver tabby she-cat with dark green eyes

Apprentice, Dovepaw

Sweetpool: Tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes

Apprentice, Sagepaw

Shadowstep: Dark gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Mistpaw

Goldenstripe: Golden tabby tom with lighter paws and light green eyes

Thrushpool: Sandy-gray she-cat with soft, long fur and friendly yellow eyes

Queens

Applefrost: Bright red-orange tabby she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Scarredbelly's kits: Viperkit & Poppykit)

Apprentices

Dovepaw: White and gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Mistpaw: Pale gray she-cat with sharp golden eyes

Sagepaw: Silver and white she-cat with yellow-orange eyes

Elders

Gorsespring: Brown she-cat with blue eyes

Rainfall: Blue-gray tabby she-cat with lighter paws and a dark tail tip and yellow eyes

Kits

Viperkit: Silver and white tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Poppykit: Red-orange tabby she-cat with green eyes

ShadowClan

Leader- Sharpstar: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Deputy- Blizzardstripe: Pale ginger she-cat with hazel eyes

Medicine cat- Rainpelt: Blueish-gray she-cat with hazel eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Pinenose: Dark ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Warriors

Marshflame: Brown tabby tom with yellow-amber eyes

Ebonydust: Smoky-black tabby tom with amber eyes

Ivyfur: Silver and white tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Snowfall: Light gray almost white she-cat with frosty blue eyes

Cherryshadow: Tortoiseshell she-cat with dark green eyes

Mistypelt: Blue-gray she-cat with orange eyes

Frostshade: White tom with black patches and orange eyes

Lightningstreak: Black tom with pale green eyes

Spotpelt: Black and white spotted tom with amber eyes

Sheepshadow: Dark black tabby tom with green-yellow eyes

Dewpath: Black and brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Junipertail: Night-black tom with yellow eyes

Harepelt: Dark calico tom with dark ginger patches and orange eyes

Lilymist: Smoky-black she-cat with amber eyes

Queens

Rainpelt: Blueish-gray she-cat with hazel eyes (Mother to Marshflame's kits: Willowkit & Palekit)

Kits

Willowkit: Dark brown tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Palekit: Pale blue-gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

WindClan

Leader- Robinstar: Reddish-brown she-cat with yellow eyes and a scarred muzzle

Deputy- Jumptail: Dark ginger tabby tom with a slim tail and yellow eyes

Medicine cat- Plumbreeze: Blue, purple, and cream calico she-cat with purple eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Foxblaze: Golden tabby she-cat with fierce blue eyes

Warriors

Sunstorm: Yellow-orange tabby tom with broad shoulders and blue eyes

Honeyspirit: Golden-brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Featherwind: Soft gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Rabbitpool: Ginger and white tom with orange eyes

Whitewillow: Dark gray tabby she-cat with long, feathered fur and blue eyes

Firesong: Flame-colored tabby tom with orange eyes and white paws

Talonstorm: Gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Appletail: Cream tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Bramblepaw

Stormheart: Large brown tabby tom with green eyes

Redtuft: Calico tom with orange eyes

Rosecloud: Calico she-cat with light blue eyes

Swiftstream: Lithe brown tabby she-cat with dark stripes and yellow eyes

Ashhollow: Bright yellow tabby tom with yellow eyes

Spruceheart: Creamy-brown tabby tom with yellow-green eyes

Gorsescar: Dull orange tabby tom with green eyes

Maplestorm: Calico tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Sootswipe: Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Stormpath: Cream tabby she-cat with green eyes

Queens

Flowerstalk: Gray spotted she-cat with dark spots and yellow eyes (Mother to Jumptail's kits: Heatherkit, Shrewkit, and Weaselkit)

Apprentices

Bramblepaw: Dark cream tabby tom with dark blue eyes

Kits

Heatherkit: Light gray she-cat with yellow eyes and faint dark gray patches

Shrewkit: Russet tabby tom with burning yellow eyes

Weaselkit: Dark brown tabby she-cat with orange eyes and lighter paws

RiverClan

Leader- Creekstar: Dark blue tabby tom with light blue eyes

Deputy- Amberlight: Ginger and white she-cat with soft orange eyes

Medicine cat- Sagestrike: Smoky-black she-cat with light green eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Ravenstream: Small black she-cat with a white tail tip and yellow eyes

Warriors

Weaselrapid: Light brown tabby tom with blue eyes

Brightriver: Blue tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Squirrelpool: Ginger she-cat with a fluffy tail and yellow eyes

Timberstream: Brown tabby tom with bright blue eyes

Barkheart: Brown she-cat with lighter paws and light green eyes

Stormwater: Dark blue tabby she-cat with watery blue eyes

Cloverfoot: Tortoiseshell she-cat with a fluffy tail and orange eyes

Rockystream: Spotted gray tom with light blue eyes

Splashbreeze: Red and white tabby tom with orange eyes

Robinstorm: Red-brown she-cat with dark blue eyes

Twilightstream: Black she-cat with white splotches and blue eyes

Echomist: White she-cat with gray spots and green eyes

Oakstorm: Oak-brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Otternose: Brown tabby she-cat with lighter paws and green eyes

Blazelight: Ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes

Pikecurrent: Black and white tom with white freckles and blue eyes

Dapplefrost: Black she-cat with white spots and blue eyes

Queens

Sagestrike: Smoky-black she-cat with light green eyes (Mother to Blazelight's kits: Mallowkit, Flamekit, and Brackenkit)

Silverfish: Silver tabby she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Weaselrapid's kit: Woollykit)

Kits

Woollykit: Sleek silver and white tabby tom with blue eyes

Mallowkit: Bight flame-colored tabby tom with light green eyes

Flamekit: Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Brackenkit: Pale orange tabby tom with green eyes

SkyClan

Leader- Crowstar: Cream tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy- Ambersun: Ginger and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Medicine cat- Leaftail: Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Warriors

Maplefire: Calico she-cat with amber eyes

Cinderstrike: Gray she-cat with lighter paws and yellow eyes

Meadowsky: Mottled brown she-cat with orange eyes

Creekwind: Cream tabby tom with blue eyes

Redfur: Russet tabby tom with green eyes

Plumfur: Golden tabby she-cat with green eyes

Falcondive: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Cherryfur: Red-brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Acornfall: Reddish brown she-cat with orange eyes

Brightpetal: Bright ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Daisyheart: Yellow tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Swampclaw: Dark ginger tabby tom with lighter paws and dark green eyes

Breezepool: Dark cream tabby tom with dark blue eyes

Cats Outside The Clans

Hawkpelt: Dusty brown tabby tom with light yellow eyes

Starlinglight: Silver gray tom with orange eyes

Rushspring: White tom with gray patches and orange eyes

Adder: Dark cream tabby tom with ice-blue eyes and a scarred pelt

Rowan: Cream tabby tom with ginger and brown patches and green eyes

Pheonix: Bright red tabby she-cat with green eyes

Prologue

"It's going to be alright, Scarredbelly." Meowed the dark gray tabby she-cat as she looked sympathetically at the pacing tom. "Queens have been kitting for generations and accidents are very rare."

"Easy for you to say," the tom meowed, eyes troubled as he looked at his friend. "Your kitting went without issue." His tone wasn't angry, just worried and anxious as he stole a glance at the nursery.

"Just think about how cute your kits will be when they arrive, Scarredbelly." Suggested a large light tortoiseshell cat, whose eyes glittered with amusement. "Little versions of you and Applefrost will be adorable."

The dark gray tabby she-cat shot the tom an amused look. "When will you have kits again, Beetlestar?" She asked, licking a paw and drawing it over her ear. "Sweetpool can't be the only kit you want to pass on your bloodline."

Beetlestar's eyes grew sharp. "I'll be fine with the kit I have right now, Darkfang." He meowed, tail tip twitching. "Besides, I don't think any she-cats would want to have kits with their leader."

Darkfang gave him a doubtful look. "That's not what I've seen," she meowed but a shriek prevented her from explaining further. Her head swiveled around and she looked at Scarredbelly, who was trembling. "Breathe, Scarredbelly." She meowed, her voice shaking.

"I-I can't take it!" The warrior cried and rushed into the bramble den, bursting inside and startling the three she-cats inside. One of them, a bright red-orange tabby, was gazing at her plumped belly.

"Scarredbelly," she breathed, flicking her green eyes up to her mate, eyes loving and tired. "Look at how beautiful they are."

Scarredbelly followed her gaze and his breath hitched in his throat. *Oh, my StarClan. They're perfect.* Paws thundered behind him and fur

brushed on either side of the warrior.

Darkfang gasped, her eyes filling with emotion as they rested on the two kits squeaking and squirming at the mother's belly. "Applefrost, they're amazing." She whispered, looking to the queen with glowing eyes.

Applefrost looked at her Clanmate, panting and exhausted. "Thanks, Darkfang." She purred, breathless as she looked to her mate. "Come over here, Scarredbelly, they don't bite."

"Yet," added the other she-cat, a smaller white cat with orange eyes. "You have two adorable daughters, Scarredbelly."

"Thank you, Echopaw." Purred the warrior as he dipped his head to the medicine cat apprentice. "And thank you, Dustynose." He added as the medicine cat looked at him in amusement.

"It's what I trained for," responded the medicine cat as she nudged her apprentice with a forepaw. "Echopaw will check on you in the morning, Applefrost. I'll bring you some soaked moss and something to eat in a moment."

Applefrost, too tired to respond, only nodded and waited for the two medicine cats to exit the den. She looked at Scarredbelly, letting out a breathless purr. "Are your paws frozen to the ground?" She meowed. "Come over here and help me name our kits."

On numb legs, Scarredbelly complied and he padded around his mate and new kits. As he curled around his mate and new kits, he looked up at his leader and the deputy. Darkfang's eyes were all for the kits, full of admiration and emotion. Beetlestar's eyes were also on the kits, but on one in particular. Following his leader's gaze, Scarredbelly's eyes landed on his biggest kit, a silver and white tabby.

"That kit," breathed the leader as he stared in horror at the kit. "It looks so much like Rushspring." Beetlestar looked startled as he gazed at the tabby kitten.

Scarredbelly's heart sank as he gazed down at his daughter. *All of*

Rushspring's patches of gray fur are in the same place as the kit's. He thought with dread. *She gets the tabby from myself and Hawkpelt, but she's the only kit with silver and gray.*

Darkfang nudged her leader with her paw, jerking her muzzle for Scarredbelly to follow. "Let's allow Applefrost to get some sleep," she suggested, her voice nervous. "She has to be very tired."

Scarredbelly took the hint and nodded, touching noses with his mate as he stood up. "I'll be back in the morning," he promised and, with a last anxious glance at his kits, left the den.

Outside in the crisp leafbare air, Darkfang turned to the two toms, her eyes troubled. "That kit won't be accepted by the rest of the Clan with a pelt like that." She flicked her tail as she spoke, eyes darting from Beetlestar to Scarredbelly. "Rushspring was once a great cat, but now that he's in exile, the Clan will scrutinize the kit."

Beetlestar's whiskers quivered. "Every cat knows of Rushspring's treachery," he added. "But even so, the kit will be seen as a bad omen."

Scarredbelly's scarred pelt bristled in defense of his daughter. "She's a newborn kit!" He snapped at his leader. "If any cat rejects her because of her fur, I'll rip their pelt off!"

Darkfang rested her tail along her friend's spine, making him jump. "No cat will doubt your loyalty to your family, Scarredbelly." She meowed carefully. "But we cannot sway their opinions about your daughter. It wasn't her fault she bears the pelt of a cat that betrayed his Clan."

"Then why should she be punished for the wrongdoing of Rushspring?" He flashed back at her, his voice rising. "Rushspring knew what he was doing was wrong, and he still did it. My kit won't walk down the same path he did because of her fur."

"Even so," interjected Beetlestar. "How can you sway her to be good when her Clan may shut her out?" When Scarredbelly stared hopelessly at his leader, he went on. "Think about that very carefully, Scarredbelly."

"But something horrible is coming to the lake!" He protested, tail lashing back and forth. "Dustynose said that Rushspring will bring something dark and cruel to the lake. What if that something is my kit?" He lowered his voice. "Would that mean I'd have to kill my brother *and* my daughter?"

Darkfang licked his ear to comfort him, her eyes gentle. "Only time will tell, my friend." She meowed. "Until then, you need to be the father Hawkpelt never was." She paused, her eyes flicking to Beetlestar. "The father Spiderstorm never was to Brightgaze and Hawkpelt."

Scarredbelly let out a long sigh before nodding, padding away from the two cats as he headed for the medicine cat's den. Sticking his head through the lichen, he called out in a small voice. "Dustynose?"

The light brown face of the medicine cat appeared in the dark, but Scarredbelly could see her glowing light green eyes. "Scarredbelly?" She meowed, confused and concerned. "What's the matter? Is something wrong with Applefrost or the kits?"

Scarredbelly shook his head, padding toward the she-cat. "It's something else that worries me, Dustynose." He confessed, looking up at her. "And it's about one of the kits."

Dustynose studied the warrior with curious light green eyes before looking over her shoulder at the sleeping form of Echopaw. "Let's go for a walk around the territory," she suggested. "Then you can tell me what's on your mind."

Scarredbelly nodded and padded out of the den after the medicine cat, pelt prickling as he heard meowing from the nursery. As they headed out of the thorn tunnel, he began to speak. "One of the kits shares Rushspring's gray and white coloring." He mewed, looking at the she-cat. "Although she has tabby stripes, I'm worried that the Clan will see past them and shut her out."

Dustynose's right ear twitched in understanding. "I noticed and feared the same thing when the kit was born. The Clan is still reeling from what your brother did to us, even after all these

moons." She flicked her tail behind her as they padded along a trail patrols often took. "While I believe that the Clan will have a grudge against the kit, I don't think that they will push her into her own self-exile."

"But she's so young," he meowed. "Why would they have a grudge against a cat so young and defenseless?"

The light brown she-cat gave him a look. "Why does the sun rise and set every day? Why does it snow every leafbare? Why does a cat's fur never stop growing?" She stopped at his side. "The only way we can know why a cat does what they do is to see inside their mind." Dustynose let out a humorless laugh. "And no cat has been able to do that in Clan history."

Scarredbelly's tail lashed behind him. "So you're saying I'm worried about it for nothing?" He asked, defeated.

Dustynose touched her nose to his cheek, eyes soft. "Of course not," she meowed. "It's good that you worry about your kits. We cannot know for sure how the Clan will react until they've seen the kits. And that won't happen for another half-moon."

Scarredbelly sighed. "I guess you're right," he murmured. Tipping his head, he gazed up at the moon as it glowed in the starry night sky. "My only hope is that they don't take her pelt as a warning or bad omen from StarClan."

Dustynose let out a small purr, eyes glinting. "The only cats who receive warnings or omens from StarClan are leaders and medicine cats." She reminded him. "However the Clan may react, they'll see past her fur and see her personality."

Scarredbelly nodded. "I hope you're right, Dustynose." He meowed and dipped his head. "For my daughter's sake," he added quietly.

Chapter One

"Viperkit, wake up." Mewed a high-pitched voice, making the kit's ear twitch. "Wake up, Viperkit!"

Another voice, more stern than the first, made Viperkit inwardly groan. "Poppykit, let her sleep."

"But Applefrost!" Complained the first cat, Poppykit. "You said we could see the Clan when she opens her eyes!"

"*When* she opens her eyes," Applefrost repeated sternly. "Telling her to wake up won't make her eyes open any quicker."

Viperkit let out a small grunt as she shifted, pressing herself against the soft belly of her mother. *All I want to do is sleep.* She thought, her small tail lashing in anger.

"But there's so much to see!" Poppykit prodded Viperkit's side, making her flinch. "Come on, Viperkit, don't you want to see the camp and all the cats we haven't met?"

"Leave me alone, Poppykit," Viperkit mumbled crossly, turning her head away from her sister. As she shifted into a more comfortable position, Poppykit groaned.

"She's awake, Applefrost." She pointed out. Viperkit pictured her mother rolling her eyes and shaking her head at Poppykit. The image brought a smirk to Viperkit's face.

"And whose fault is that?" Meowed Applefrost as she flicked her tail over Viperkit, making her purr. "Just because she's awake, doesn't mean she's opened her eyes yet."

"Ugh," the sound of Poppykit flopping onto the ground made Viperkit choke back a laugh. "Don't laugh at me!" Teeth sank into her tail and Viperkit let out a squeak of pain, kicking out with her hind legs and striking something. "Ow!"

Viperkit pried her eyes open, feeling pain all over her face as the crust broke away and light blinded her. Everything was blurry as she peered around, spotting her mother's unmistakable bright red-orange tabby fur. It nearly blinded Viperkit as she looked up her mother's body, seeing her scolding Poppykit.

"It wasn't my fault!" Poppykit was arguing as she glared over at Viperkit. "It was-" She stopped, her eyes widening. "She opened her eyes!"

"I have a name, you know," Viperkit grumbled, looking back to her mother. Applefrost had the brightest green eyes she had ever seen and it startled Viperkit. *Are my eyes that green?* She wondered.

Poppykit bounded toward her, her eyes, which were a dull blue, wide and happy. "You finally opened them!" She squeaked. "Now we can see the camp!"

"Not so fast," Applefrost meowed, placing a paw on Poppykit's tail. "Your fur makes you look like you were dragged through thorns backward! You need to look perfect when you meet the Clan." She pulled her kit toward her chest, starting to lick her fur.

"No!" Wailed Poppykit as she tried to wiggle her way out of her mother's grasp. "Help me!"

There was a loud purr from the opposite side of the large den and Viperkit noticed a white speckled black she-cat watching on in amusement. She didn't look like Applefrost, as her pelt was different and her eyes were a completely different color. "When you get older, you'll be grooming yourself every single day."

Poppykit let out a shriek of fear as she froze, giving Applefrost the chance to clean her without struggle. "I won't ever grow up!" She declared. "I'll stay in the nursery forever!"

"And you'll be bored for the rest of your life," Viperkit meowed, shaking her head and peering at the new cat. "Who are you?"

"Viperkit! Be nice!" Applefrost scolded as she groomed Poppykit.

"It's okay, Applefrost," purred the she-cat. "My name's Badgerstorm,

little one." The speckled she-cat dipped her head to Viperkit. "I'm a friend of your father."

"Scarredbelly?" Poppykit leaped out of Applefrost's grip, her eyes wide as she padded to Viperkit's side. "You know Scarredbelly?"

"I've known him since he was a small kit like you two," Badgerstorm purred. "He was one of Sweetpool's best friends." Her eyes filled with memories as she gazed at the two kits. "Once, Sweetpool beat your father in a game of Warrior and Mouse."

Poppykit tipped her head up at the queen, her eyes questioning. "I have a question," she raised her paw in the air. "I get that Viperkit's stripes are as sharp as a snake's fangs, but why am I named after a seed when I have a bright pelt?"

Badgerstorm's eyes flashed with pain at her question and Viperkit hissed at her sister. "I-it's alright, Viperkit." She meowed, clearing her throat and looking at Applefrost. "Poppykit, before you both were born, there was a wonderful cat named Poppyfur. She was a wonderful mother, Clanmate, and friend to not only me but to Scarredbelly as well.

"She was the one who he went to when he was injured and got his name changed." Badgerstorm paused, tail flicking. "He went to her and she was the one who opened his eyes to your mother."

"That can be a story when you both are older, however," Applefrost added quickly.

Badgerstorm chuckled in amusement and nodded to the two kits. "In the end, Poppykit, you were named after Poppyfur." She concluded.

"Named after her?" Viperkit pricked her ears. "What do you mean?"

Applefrost cleared her throat, rising to her paws behind her daughters and padding in front of them. "Let's leave that story at that," she meowed, her voice trembling though she held a fake smile. "You two still want to see the Clan and your Clanmates?"

Poppykit's eyes twinkled with excitement and she sprang to her

paws. "Yes!" She meowed and looked over at Viperkit. "I'll be the first one to meet Beetlestar!"

"Yeah, right!" Viperkit retorted, the story about Poppyfur forgotten. "I'll be the first one to meet Darkfang!"

"Which one's that?" Poppykit asked, confused.

Applefrost purred in amusement. "Darkfang is the Clan's deputy," she meowed. "Go outside and get some fresh air, your Clanmates would love to see you both." Ushering the two she-cats out of the nursery. "I'll be laying right here when you get back."

"You aren't coming with us?" Viperkit stared at her mother, suddenly anxious.

"Would you like me to?" Applefrost asked.

Before Viperkit could respond, a voice called across the camp. "ThunderClan's newest kits have their eyes open!" Viperkit jumped, alarmed as a muscular golden tabby tom strode gracefully toward them. "Hello, kits."

Viperkit was the first to speak to the new cat, beating her sister while Poppykit stared up at him in amazement. "Who are you?" She meowed, her stubby tail twitching back and forth.

The large golden tom purred with amusement, his tail twitching. "My name is Goldenstripe, kits." He meowed silkily and Viperkit's ears perked up. "I suppose you," he pointed a claw at Viperkit. "Are Viperkit and this," he looked at Poppykit. "Is Poppykit."

"That's right!" Poppykit bounced up and down, her excitement making Viperkit sick. *Kiss up.* She thought with a snort.

Goldenstripe looked down at Viperkit and he smiled. "Is it your first time out of the nursery?"

"Not for me," boasted Poppykit as she puffed out her chest in pride. "I've already been outside the nursery. Viperkit just opened her eyes and it's her first time out of the nursery."

Viperkit rolled her eyes and cuffed her sister over the ear with a paw, causing her to growl in annoyance. "I needed time," she argued and looked up at Goldenstripe, who was watching in amusement. "Do you know all of the cats in ThunderClan?"

"Of course," purred the tabby warrior. "Would you like to meet some of them?"

"Yes!" Viperkit meowed, tail flicking excitedly. *Finally, getting to what I want!*

"Follow me," Goldenstripe meowed and turned on his heels, padding away. Viperkit scampered after him, Poppykit on her heels as they neared a large tree with dangling branches. At the trunk of the tree were three cats, a tortoiseshell she-cat, a pale-gray tabby tom, and a white and silver tabby she-cat. "Sweetpool! Cursedblood! Dawnslash!" He called as they neared. "Come meet Applefrost's kits!"

The tortoiseshell she-cat lifted her head, her hazel eyes sparkling as she saw the two kits. "Welcome to ThunderClan, kits!" She purred, leaping to her paws and rushing toward the two.

Viperkit shied away from the she-cat, claws unsheathing and pricking the ground. "Uh, hi?" She meowed questioningly.

"Sorry," she meowed, her eyes shining with guilt. "My name is Sweetpool, your father's best friend." Sweetpool's voice cracked as she spoke, as though recalling painful memories.

Poppykit was too busy gawking at the pale tabby's rippling muscles to hear anything the tortoiseshell warrior had to say. "Amazing," she breathed in Viperkit's ear. "Look at all those muscles!"

Viperkit scoffed and rolled her eyes, shoving her sister with a paw. "Jump in the lake, mousebrain." She meowed and looked up at Sweetpool, who was flanked by the two other warriors. "Who are all of you?"

To their left, Goldenstripe cleared his throat and padding around the kits. "This is Cursedblood," he meowed, nodding to the pale tabby warrior. "You know Sweetpool and this is Dawnslash." He blinked at the silver and white tabby she-cat and she dipped her head formally.

"Greetings," she meowed, her voice polite. "I assume you two are Applefrost and Scarredbelly's kits?"

"That's right," Goldenstripe grinned down at the two kits. "Meet Poppykit and Viperkit."

Cursedblood looked at Viperkit, his head cocked to one side. "Why'd Scarredbelly name you after a snake?" He asked rudely.

Sweetpool shot him a glare and cuffed his ear roughly with a forepaw. "Be nice to Scarredbelly's kits, Cursedblood!" She scolded, her ears flattened to her head.

"Cursedblood?" Viperkit tilted her head as she said his name, catching his attention. "Why did your mother name you after something so horrible?"

While the tabby warrior stared in shock at the kit, Goldenstripe laughed. "She got you there, Cursedblood!" He chuckled and nosed Viperkit and Poppykit toward Dawnslash. "She's Cursedblood and Venombranch's sister."

"Hi!" Poppykit tottered up to the she-cat, staring in awe up at her. "I like your eyes."

Dawnslash's eyebrows lifted in surprise and her mouth twisted into a half-smile. "Thanks, Poppykit." She meowed humbly.

"Dawnslash! Sweetpool!" Called a rather different voice from behind the kits. Viperkit turned around to see a dark gray tabby she-cat with green eyes padding toward them. Her head and tail her high, intimidating and threatening. "It's time for Dovepaw and Sagepaw to spar against each other." She meowed, looking between the two she-cats. "Do you think they're ready?"

Dawnslash looked at Sweetpool, amused as she flicked her tail. "I'm

pretty sure Dovepaw could kick Sagepaw's tail in a spar." She gave Sweetpool a sly look. "After all, I am her mentor."

Sweetpool snorted and looked at Dawnslash. "Sagepaw knows all the battle moves like the back of her paw," she countered and dipped her head to the dark tabby. "We'll get to it right away, Darkfang."

"Good," purred the she-cat as she looked at Cursedblood. "You get Shadowstep and Mistpaw. You three will go hunting and when you come back, you'll spar."

"Of course, Darkfang." Cursedblood dipped his head and looked down at the kits. "See you two later," he purred and padded off with Sweetpool and Dawnslash bickering behind him.

Darkfang looked down, surprised to see Viperkit and Poppykit. "Hello, you two," she purred, crouching down to their level. "How are you two today?"

"We're good!" Chirped Poppykit as she stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Viperkit. "Are you the Clan's deputy?"

The tabby she-cat nodded, rising to her full height once more. "Yes, I am, little one." She purred and twitched her ear.

"Viperkit! Poppykit!" Applefrost's call from the nursery made Darkfang look over her shoulder where the queen was lying outside the den. "Time to come inside!"

Viperkit groaned and padded between the deputy's legs, Poppykit following close behind. "Why do we have to go inside so early?" She grumbled, looking to her sister in annoyance.

"Because Applefrost thinks we'll die if we stay out of her line of sight for too long," sighed her sister as she padded by her side.

Applefrost flicked her tail as her kits sulked toward her, their tails dragging behind them. "Keep your chins up, you two," she meowed sternly, licking the tops of their heads. "Don't worry, you'll have more time to play and see the Clan tomorrow."

Viperkit tried to act upbeat as she trailed after her sister as Applefrost herded them back into the nursery. She sighed, looking to the right as she spotted a bramble tendril out of the nursery's den wall. Padding toward it, she batted the bramble, surprised as it let out a hiss and leaped toward her. "Applefrost!" She screeched, instinctively rolling to the side, narrowly escaping the fangs of the bramble.

"Adder!" Cried Applefrost as she picked up Poppykit by the scruff, staring in horror as the slim, scaly tendril arched and hissed at Viperkit. "Help! Adder!"

Viperkit trembled as the adder's beady yellow eyes narrowed on her, its forked tongue flicking in and out of its mouth as it hissed threateningly. She scrambled to her paws, but the adder loomed over her. Tears sprang in her eyes, blinding her as the creature lunged for her, its fangs sinking into her left front leg. Viperkit let out a shriek of pain and lashed out with her free paw, her tiny claws slid harmlessly off the scales.

"Viperkit!" The pain numbed Viperkit's senses as she staggered, the adder still clinging onto her leg. Applefrost became a blur of tabby red-orange as she began to feel light-headed and nauseous, making the camp spin around her.

A flash of white fur and a loud snarl made Viperkit blink slowly, trying to clear her vision. Sluggishly, she managed to stay on her paws as the snake's body was thrown away from her, the searing pain in her leg starting to dull into an ache. Someone was snarling at the snake, standing bravely between the kit and the creature as cats began to rush toward Viperkit.

"Viperkit!" A large dusty gray tabby tom with horrifying scars rushed toward her, his orange eyes wide with distress. Viperkit tried to back away but her hind legs trembled and melted underneath her, making her fall to the ground. "Get Dustynose!" The warrior yowled, his voice high with fear and concern as Viperkit's vision blurred and she blacked out.

Chapter Two

Pain awoke Viperkit from her dreadful sleep. She blinked open her eyes, yawning as she looked around. She was in a large cave that smelled strongly of herbs and Viperkit gagged. Her leg ached and she looked at it, seeing it wrapped in herbs and cobwebs. Viperkit let out a sigh and heaved herself to her paws and cried out as pain shot up her leg and caused her to fall.

"That's why you don't get up when you wake up, Viperkit." Commented a smooth voice from the nest across from hers. Glowing light green eyes made the kit unsheathe her claws. "Relax," meowed the cat, who sounded like a she-cat. "I'm the medicine cat, Dustynose." The she-cat rose and Viperkit sheathed her claws, still wary. "You're lucky that adder wasn't poisonous, Viperkit. You gave your family and Clan quite the scare, though."

"It wasn't my fault it looked like a bramble," she muttered, her voice bitter. Viperkit looked up at the medicine cat as she padded towards her, bending over and sniffing the herbs around her leg.

"That'll need changing shortly," she meowed and looked at the kit, her eyes gentle like a feather. "How do you feel? Any pain or discomfort?"

"Only when I move it or try to get up it hurts," Viperkit answered, looking at her wounded leg, scowling. "What did the Clan do to the snake after it bit me?" She asked, meeting Dustynose's eyes.

Dustynose seemed troubled and off as she returned her steady gaze. Her tail flicked back and forth behind her, giving her anxiety away in a heartbeat. "Your father killed it and he and Spottedshine buried it outside of the camp where no cat could find it."

"Why bury it when it attacked me?" Viperkit meowed, confused and surprised. *A creature who attacks a kit shouldn't be buried.*

Dustynose rose to her paws and blinked down at her. "Because if they didn't, the smell of blood would've attracted other animals like foxes or badgers." She paused, her eyes clouding. "Well, I'll let Applefrost and Scarredbelly you're awake. Your mother might see you so you can get something to eat."

"And don't worry," added another voice, and another pair of eyes, this time orange, flashed in the dark cave. "We'll keep you company and fetch soaked moss whenever you need it."

Dustynose nodded and flicked her tail. "I need to check on Badgerstorm and see how she's going to give her some borage." She turned to the orange-eyed she-cat. "Could you change Viperkit's wounds and rewrap her leg while I see Badgerstorm and Applefrost?"

"Of course, Dustynose." Purred the other, much younger, she-cat as she turned away from Viperkit and headed for the herb stores. "How much borage do you need for Badgerstorm?"

Dustynose looked thoughtful for a moment before replying. "I'd say two leaves, but I'll give some to Applefrost for Poppykit." She looked back to Viperkit and gave her a half-smile. "The time you have to spend in here will fly by," she promised. "You won't know you were in here." Turning away to get the herbs, she headed for the den entrance and disappeared outside.

When she left, the orange-eyed she-cat padded soundlessly toward Viperkit, cobwebs, and herbs dangling from her jaws as she sat down in front of the kit. "Alright," she meowed, placing the greenery gently on the stone floor and looking at Viperkit's injured leg. "Let's see how the bite is reacting to the marigold and wild garlic."

"Reacting?" Viperkit echoed as the she-cat began to peel off the green and white wrapping, grimacing against the pain.

The she-cat nodded as she looked up to meet Viperkit's eyes with hers. "Different wounds react differently to herbs than another might," she explained. "For example, a bee sting won't react to

catmint at all other than make the cat who eats it a bit playful and annoying." She chuckled softly and Viperkit nodded wordlessly. When the herbs were completely pulled off Viperkit's leg, the she-cat purred in approval. "Very good. It's reacting to the herbs very nicely."

Viperkit's ears pricked at the she-cat's words. She looked down at where she was bitten and saw two puncture holes where the adder's fangs had pierced through her fur and skin. "It feels a lot better," she admitted.

"That's a good sign," purred the other she-cat and she picked up a green leaf with a yellow-orange bud at the end. "This might feel weird so bear with me, okay?" She warned, placing the herb between her forepaws and firmly pressing it on either side of Viperkit's leg and began to wrap it around the wound.

Viperkit's teeth clenched and she dug her claws into the moss that she laid on. She growled in slight pain as the she-cat worked as quickly and gently as possible, wrapping and weaving the herbs into place and slapping some cobwebs and garlic on it.

"There, all done." She meowed, sounding a bit breathless as she looked at Viperkit. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" Her voice was light and so were her orange eyes, making Viperkit smile.

"Yeah, it didn't hurt that bad," Viperkit added and flexed her claws, already feeling a bit stronger. "What's your name? I never caught it."

"Never threw it," she joked and broke into a loud purr, causing Viperkit to join in. "My name's Echopaw. I'm Dustynose's apprentice."

Viperkit nodded and flicked her tail, blinking at Echopaw. "Nice to meet you, Echopaw." She meowed, grinning at the medicine cat apprentice.

"Nice to meet you too, Viperkit," Echopaw responded and rose to her paws, tail flicking in the air. "Say, you'll die of boredom in here. Why don't we go outside?"

"But I can't stand," Viperkit protested. "How will we go outside?"

Echopaw grinned mischievously down at the kit. "Just because you can't stand doesn't mean I can't have you on my shoulders." She replied, already crouching down. "Come on."

Excited, Viperkit hobbled on three legs toward the medicine cat apprentice and heaved herself onto her shoulders, with her help. She sank her claws into Echopaw's fur to climb up her back and her front paws on her head. "Woah!" She meowed, nearly falling off the she-cat.

"Hang on tightly," Echopaw purred and made sure Viperkit didn't fall. "Don't take out clumps of fur or I'll put thorns in your nest!" She joked, but Viperkit wondered if she would.

As they headed out of the cave, the green lichen that dangled from the stone ceiling caught on her ear and she flattened her ears. *Stupid nature.* She thought crossly as Echopaw padded into the sunlit clearing. "See?" Echopaw meowed, ear flicking. "Sunlight doesn't hurt you."

Viperkit didn't answer as she looked around, seeing many cats occupying the shaded parts of the camp. Trees loomed over the large camp and Viperkit stared up at their branches as they twisted and stretched upward. She stared around the camp, spotting Applefrost basking outside the nursery as Poppykit slept in a ball in her belly fur. Jealousy stabbed Viperkit in the chest as she watched Applefrost's chest rose and fell, seeming to be peaceful.

"Where do you want to go?" Asked Echopaw, making Viperkit snap her attention away from the nursery.

"What about the elder's den?" Viperkit suggested, her eyes flicking to the bramble den by a large oak tree. The moss growing on the trunk of the tree was bright and green, so lush and full of life.

"Do you want to meet Gorsespring and Rainfall?" Echopaw meowed, heading into the direction of the den.

"Who are they?"

Echopaw purred in amusement and flicked her tail over her back, touching Viperkit's shoulders. "Gorsespring is the oldest cat in ThunderClan and Rainfall is the previous leader since she retired."

"Then Beetlestar became leader?" Viperkit wondered why the older leader had given up her position to become an elder that didn't do anything for the Clan. *I'd rather serve my Clan until I die.*

Echopaw hesitated and shook her head, nearly tossing Viperkit off-balance. "Hawkpelt, your father's father, was deputy before she retired. He was demoted from deputy many moons before Scarredbelly became a warrior."

"Why?"

"I don't know," admitted the she-cat. "When Hawkpelt was demoted, his rival, Ripplepelt, became the next deputy. He was better than Hawkpelt, but he didn't last long. Ripplepelt died in his sleep a few moons later and Rainfall made Starlinglight her deputy."

"What happened to him?" Viperkit asked, tail twitching.

"Starlingstar was driven to madness as cats began to die around him," Echopaw's voice was a low rasp, ragged with grief. "When Rainfall exiled him, Beetlescar became leader and he's been leader ever since."

Viperkit was silent as they approached the den, ducking inside before they could stop.

"Good morning Gorsespring, Rainfall." She purred, dipping her head to the two elders as they turned their heads to peer at the visitors. "How are you both doing?"

The brown she-cat, Gorsespring, looked at the kit on her head, her eyes sightless. "There's a milky scent in the air," she pointed out. "Who else is with you, Echopaw?"

"Just Viperkit," the medicine cat apprentice replied, raising her head.

Rainfall, the other elder, smiled gently up at the kit. "Hello, little

one," she purred. "I've heard a lot about you, you know." She leaned back stretching her front paws as she peered up at the kit. "You and your sister have quite the reputation in a Clan of which you barely know."

"Let's not scare the poor kit, Rainfall." Echopaw chuckled, as though sensing Viperkit's shock and anxiety through her paws. "We just wanted to stop by and say hi."

"Why not stay a bit longer, Echo?" Gorsespring questioned, leaning forward and fixing her sightless eyes on the medicine cat apprentice. "The sun's barely risen."

Echopaw's ears flattened at the nickname and Viperkit felt them starting to burn with embarrassment. "We can't stay long, Gorsespring." She meowed gently, starting to turn away to leave. "Have a good day, you two."

"You as well, Echopaw!" Rainfall called after them as they left the den behind and padded into the clearing once more.

"That was...interesting." Echopaw meowed once they were out of earshot of the old she-cats.

Viperkit nodded, her tail flicking as she looked around the camp. "Where are we going to go now?" She asked, looking down at Echopaw's muzzle.

Echopaw blinked up at the kit, her eyes sympathetic. "Nowhere fun, I'm afraid." She meowed and began to pad toward the medicine cat den.

"No!" Viperkit yelped, scrambling back and sliding down the she-cats neck, twisting her injured leg painfully.

"I have to help Dustynose, Viperkit." Echopaw meowed gently, padding into the mouth of the cave. "We'll go outside more tomorrow."

Viperkit whimpered as she turned around, seeing the sunlight from outside the camp being blocked out by the lichen and vines. *Tomorrow isn't soon enough!* She thought despairingly as Echopaw

padded further and further away from the den entrance.

Chapter Three

Horrible screeching made Viperkit yelp, surprising herself and the other she-cats in the den. "What was that?" She asked, looking to Dustynose and Echopaw's nests.

Dustynose scrambled to her paws as Echopaw opened her eyes. "That was Badgerstorm," she mewed, her eyes wide and tail lashing.

Echopaw's eyes widened in horror and fear. "Is she kitting?" She asked, eyes darting to the herb store then to Viperkit.

"Only one way to find out, Echopaw." Dustynose hurried across the den to Viperkit and looked her in the eye. "Can you hold down the den while we're gone?"

Viperkit straightened, fully awake. "You can count on me, Dustynose." She meowed, her chest puffed out.

Dustynose smiled and rubbed the fur on Viperkit's head with a paw and turned to Echopaw. "Get herbs in case she's kitting and I'll meet you in the nursery." She meowed and rushed out of the den without another word or glance.

A moon passed since Echopaw had taken Viperkit out of the medicine cat's den on her shoulders and her bite wound had healed nicely. Now, Viperkit longed for the moment she would be free from the herb-scented cave.

"We'll be back soon, Viperkit." Promised the voice of Echopaw as she rushed out of the den.

"You'd better!" Viperkit called after her, chuckling to herself as she yawned and stretched. Circling her nest, she curled into a comfortable ball and closed her eyes, darkness consuming her at once.

When she opened her eyes again, she was in a dark, murky, foggy

forest with a rancid scent and no scent of delicious, warm prey. Viperkit rose to her paws, seeing out of the corner of her eye that a tree was behind her. The tree was leafless and it loomed over her, making her feel smaller than a moon and a half old kitten. "Where am I?" She whispered in a small, scared voice.

"My favorite forest, little one." Purred a slick, calm voice as a large white and gray tom slipped out of the shadows and approached Viperkit. His shoulders rippled with muscle as he headed toward the kit. When the she-kit let out a startled yelp, he stopped. "Don't be afraid, little kit, I'm not going to harm a hair on your pelt."

Viperkit narrowed her eyes and unsheathed her claws, tail lashing back and forth. "Who are you?" She demanded, her voice giving away nothing but how much she was trembling inside. Her legs quivered and her paws shook as they tried to get away from the strange cat.

The white and gray tom inched closer toward her, his eyes gentle. "My name is something you Clan cats shouldn't have forgotten so quickly, Viperkit." His slim tail flicked over his mouth in false surprise. "I shouldn't have said your name, little one."

Viperkit stared at the tom. "How *do* you know my name?" She asked.

"I know a great deal about you, Viperkit." Meowed the tom as he padded around her and clawed his way up the dead tree behind her. Viperkit followed him with her eyes as he lounged on a thick branch. "You have a sister bearing the same name of a cat long dead, you were named after your tabby stripes, and your eyes are orange just like mine."

Viperkit blinked in shock and shifted her paws nervously. "What's your name? My father has never spoken of you before." She meowed, seeing slight amusement flash in his orange eyes.

"Your father has never spoken of me?" Viperkit nodded and he let out a wry laugh. "Don't blame him, honestly. A cat as great as me shouldn't be brought up when in front of impressionable kits such as you and your sister."

"I asked about your name," she interrupted sharply. "Not your life story."

The tom's tail kinked at the tip in surprise, then he let out a bellowing laugh. "Very snappy, just like me." He purred and tilted his head at her. "Why do you ask, little one?"

"Because you aren't in my Clan," she meowed. "Are you in another Clan?"

"You could say that, Viper." He chuckled and unsheathed his claws as he yawned and stretched. "However, I'm not like the cats inside the other five Clans."

Viperkit sat down, her tail flicking over her front paws. "Why do you say that?" She asked.

"Because I'm not the one who leads a pathetic, weak, and soft-hearted Clan." He meowed. "You see, little one, I'm the leader of a Clan greater than the other five. I lead a Clan full of strong, loyal, and powerful warriors who train apprentices without mercy."

"What about your name?" Viperkit meowed. She cocked her head to the side and the tom raised an eyebrow. "You've said all this great stuff about yourself and your so-called Clan, but you never said your name."

The tom chuckled quietly and Viperkit's tail twitched in irritation. *How hard is it to say your name?* "Little one, my name is Rushstar. I'm your father's brother and your uncle."

Viperkit stared at the leader in shock, her mouth open. "W-what?" She meowed, blinking. "Why hasn't Scarredbelly or Applefrost spoken about you?"

Rushstar shrugged. "I'm not a ThunderClan cat," he paused. "Well, not anymore, that is." Viperkit opened her mouth to speak but before she could, the tom began to blur in front of her. "Looks like you and I are waking up, little snake." He purred and flicked his tail, eyes dancing. "I'll see you soon, little Viper."

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"Aren't they beautiful, Viperkit?" Breathed Badgerstorm as she gazed fondly at her three newborn kits. Born yesterday afternoon, the kits were as small as a squirrel's bushy tail.

Viperkit nodded, though she felt uncomfortable at the sight of the three sleeping bundles. *Is this how my life will play out?* She suppressed a shudder of discomfort. *Will I have to bear the thought of being a mother?* "They're very...cute." She meowed, averting her eyes away from Badgerstorm. *It's not like I* need *like the kits.*

"Viperkit!" Poppykit exclaimed, bounding toward her littermate with her tail high. "About time you were able to come back!"

Viperkit snorted and twitched her whiskers at her sister. "Like you didn't revel in the love and attention Applefrost and Scarredbelly gave you." She retorted, but amusement crept into her voice as she spoke.

Poppykit's ears flattened playfully and she leaped at her littermate, knocking her off her paws and rolling in the dust. Viperkit raked her paw across Poppykit's cheek, claws sheathed, and let out a playful snarl. "I'll get you for that!"

"Yeah, right!" Viperkit ducked as a paw headed for her face and she sprang apart from her sister, tail lashing as she circled Poppykit. Rearing on her hind legs, Viperkit lashed out, aiming for her shoulder before dropping on all fours and lunging for Poppykit's belly and pinning her to the ground, her paws at her throat. "Got you!"

"Kits!" Applefrost's scolding voice made Viperkit turn her head to where her mother was lying in her nest, her tail flicking in annoyance. "Don't trample Badgerstorm's new litter!"

"We aren't!" Viperkit argued, annoyed that she *had* to butt in and stop their fun. *Wasn't she a kit once?*

"I'm not taking that chance," her mother retorted and looked her and Poppykit over swiftly. "Now come here, you're filthy!"

Poppykit groaned and fell into step with her sister, her ears pinned to her head and tail dragging behind her. "Leave it to Applefrost to kill the fun."

"I heard that!"

Chapter Four

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!" Viperkit writhed underneath her mother's tongue, hissing as she slipped free.

"I'm clean!" She meowed indignantly, her tail sticking in the air as she glared at her mother. "Can we go outside now? We're going to miss the ceremony!"

Applefrost rose to her paws, her green eyes lit with concern and worry as she glanced at the den entrance. She shuddered and looked back at her kits, a half-smile spreading across her face. "Stand side-by-side." Proud tears filled her ears and she sniffed, her voice cracking. "I want to treasure this moment forever."

Viperkit rolled her eyes with a groan and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her sister, impatience making her bounce on her toes while her mother stared at them. "Can we go now?"

Applefrost's whiskers twitched. "We need to wait for your father to come fetch us," she meowed. Her gaze lifted from her daughters and she peered over them, her tail twitching nervously.

Viperkit groaned and faced her sister, her tail flicking. "What do we do while we wait?" She asked, her voice bored.

Poppykit shrugged and padded toward the den entrance. "There are already so many cats already out there!" She meowed, her voice awed. "Look! I can see Mistpaw and Sagepaw talking to Dovepaw!"

"I wanna see!" Viperkit complained and shoved her sister to the side so she could see the apprentices. *We're going to be sleeping in the same den with them.* She thought, her belly tightening at the thought. *We'll have to train with them, too!*

As though her mother's words summoned him, a voice made the

two sisters look up. Scarredbelly was standing in front of them, his eyes proud with a smile across his face. "Are you two ready to become the newest apprentices in ThunderClan?" He asked.

Poppykit leaped into the air in excitement. "Yes!" She meowed, her eyes shimmering as she peered up at her father.

"We can go now," Applefrost emerged from the nursery and brushed lovingly against Scarredbelly, her eyes warm. "The Clan is waiting for you two."

Viperkit straightened as her father licked his mate's cheek and squared his shoulders. "We'll be watching you both." He licked Poppykit's head and then Viperkit's. As they padded away side-by-side, Beetlestar's voice startled Viperkit.

"We have two new kits who have reached the age of three moons and are ready to become apprentices." Viperkit lifted her head to peer up at her leader as he perched on the Highledge.

Darkfang was sitting off to the side, her eyes shining with approval as she nodded to the two kits.

"Come forward, you two." Beetlestar gestured with his tail for Viperkit and Poppykit to pad toward him. As they padded forward, he went on. "Viperkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Viperpaw. Cursedblood, you are a strong and loyal warrior and I trust that you will guide this apprentice to follow in your pawsteps."

The pale-gray tabby tom rose to his paws, a smile across his face. "It would be an honor to train her, Beetlestar." He meowed and padded toward his new apprentice. Cursedblood stood towering over her, his eyes friendly as he grazed his nose against hers, making her flinch. "Come on," he murmured, pulling his head away. "Let's go sit down and watch the rest of the ceremony." Without another word, Viperpaw's new mentor turned around and padded toward Venombranch and Dawnslash.

Viperpaw followed, slightly unsettled by the eyes following her, added by the whispers and murmurs that followed her. Her pelt

prickled as she squirmed next to her new mentor, her skin crawling.

Beetlestar turned his gaze to rest on Poppykit, who seemed anxious. "Poppykit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Poppypaw." His head swung around until his dull yellow gaze landed on Venombranch. "Venombranch, you are a talented and calm warrior and I trust that you will teach Poppypaw to be just like you."

Cursedblood perked his ears and looked at his sister, eyes wide with shock and pride. He dipped his head to the gray tabby she-cat as she strode past him and towards her apprentice.

Viperpaw watched as Venombranch touched noses with Poppypaw, her eyes satisfied as she gazed down at the new apprentice.

"Viperpaw! Poppypaw! Viperpaw! Poppypaw!" Viperpaw flattened her ears as her Clanmates began to cheer, the noise hurting her ears.

As it died down, Scarredbelly and Applefrost padded up to her and her mentor, their eyes glittering with joy and pride. "We're so proud of both of you," her father mewed as Poppypaw tottered to Viperpaw's side.

"My kits are so grown up now," Applefrost seemed to be on the verge of tears as she pressed against Scarredbelly, staring at her daughters. "Where did the time go?"

Scarredbelly purred and touched noses with Poppypaw and Viperpaw. His eyes drifted to Cursedblood and Venombranch, who was standing to the side, their eyes amused. "If they don't behave, let me know and I'll set them straight."

Cursedblood chuckled and dipped his head. "Will do, Scarredbelly." He purred, looking at Viperpaw. "Are you ready?"

Viperpaw tilted her head to the side in mild confusion. "Ready?" She echoed. "For what?"

Venombranch rose to her paws and stretched and Viperpaw could

swear she could hear the warrior's back cracking. "For the tour around the territory," she explained as she looked at the two apprentices, who hardly reached her shoulder. "Unless you'd like to pick ticks off the elders instead."

"No!" Poppypaw leaped into the air, her eyes wide as her fur bushed out. "Let's see the territory!"

Venombranch gave her apprentice a stern look, making her fall silent. "If you keep that up, the later hunting patrols won't have any prey to catch." She meowed.

Poppypaw's ears fell and Viperpaw snorted quietly. "Sorry, Venombranch." She murmured.

"Don't worry," Cursedblood playfully shoved his sister's shoulder, making her hiss in annoyance. "Venombranch is the meanest cat in the five Clans. If she does something, tell me and I'll rough her up with my claws."

"Six," Viperpaw corrected, making her mentor blink at her in confusion.

"What?" He meowed.

"You said five Clans, there's six." Viperpaw looked at the two mentors as they shared a confused look.

Scarredbelly stared at his daughter in dismay and slight concern. "Viperpaw," he began, taking a step toward her to stand in front of her. "There are only five Clans; ThunderClan, RiverClan, WindClan, ShadowClan, and SkyClan."

Viperpaw shrugged. *Don't they know that Rushstar is harboring a Clan?* She looked to her mentor as he cleared his throat.

"We'll be going now," he sounded bothered and uncomfortable as he dipped his head to Scarredbelly and Applefrost. "See you later, you two." Turning his back to the apprentices, Cursedblood began to head for the thorn tunnel.

Viperpaw scampered after him, Poppypaw on her heels with

Venombranch bringing up the rear. As she was shoved into the thorn tunnel, thorns raked her ears and she winced in pain. Hot red blood flicked against her muzzle and she licked it off quickly as it began to soak where the flesh was torn.

"Where will we go first, Venombranch?" Poppypaw asked as she padded to Viperpaw's side, her eyes shining and ears pricked forward and twitching.

Venombranch went by them, her eyes mildly amused as she met Cursedblood's orange gaze. "I'd say we start at the mossy clearing with the Sky Oak." She meowed and whisked her tail quickly to point in the direction where she was speaking. "The lakeshore would be a good place to start, too."

Cursedblood's ear twitched. "I'd like them to see the Sky Oak and the mossy clearing just so they know where we'll be at the most." He meowed.

Venombranch shrugged and looked at the two apprentices. "Follow us and let's hope you remember the way back to camp." She meowed and swiftly headed into the forest.

Viperpaw heaved a sigh and rushed after her, her tail chasing after her.

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By the time the four got back to the camp, Viperpaw's paws felt as though they could fall off. When they had gone by the lake, she scraped her paw pads on the stones and they had started to bleed, making walking painfully annoying. *At least I'm finally an apprentice and get to leave camp.* She thought, trying to cheer herself up.

Cursedblood, who didn't look nearly as tired as Viperpaw, beamed at his apprentice. "You look exhausted," he purred and flicked his tail. "Go get something off the fresh-kill pile and get some sleep. We'll start tomorrow morning off with some hunting practice."

Viperpaw wordlessly nodded and hobbled toward the prey pile, where a few measly pieces of prey were still in a small heap. She

bent over and picked up a small mouse and began to carry it toward the nursery.

"Hey, Viperpaw!" She stopped, startled by the call and she turned around to see Dovepaw, Sweetpool's daughter, trotting toward her. Dovepaw looked at the prey, her eyes amused as she towered over the new apprentice. "You sleep in the apprentice den, remember?"

Viperpaw sighed and dropped her prey in irritation. "*Now* I do," she grumbled and picked up her mouse. "I don't know where I sleep." She meowed through the fur.

Dovepaw kinked her fluffy tail over her back as she beamed at the smaller apprentice. "I'll show you," she offered and guided Viperpaw away from the nursery. "Sagepaw and Mistpaw made you and Poppypaw nests."

"Where's mine?" Viperpaw asked, too tired to care whether or not she got a good spot in the apprentice den. All she wanted was to eat and then sleep the night away.

Dovepaw grinned as she looked down at Viperpaw, her yellow eyes gleaming. "Come on, I'll show you." Viperpaw's ears pricked at the excitement that colored the older apprentice's mew.

Viperpaw sighed as she and Dovepaw headed toward the bramble thorn den, the tendrils raking against her ear as she ducked behind the older she-cat to get inside. The mouse felt heavier between her teeth as she followed Dovepaw to a moss and feather lined nest in the back right corner of the dark den.

"This is it," Dovepaw flicked her tail to the nest. It looked warm; comfortable too. "My nest is just over here." She pointed with her nose to where another, larger nest was against the bramble wall.

"Where is Poppypaw's nest?" Viperpaw asked as she stepped into her new nest and began to circle it before laying down in front of her meal.

"By Sagepaw's nest," Dovepaw answered, nodding to two nests close together on the opposite side of the den. She fixed her yellow gaze

on Viperpaw and her voice dropped to a whisper. "Hey, don't worry about starting your apprenticeship. Sure, it starts out a bit hard to adjust, but you'll get the hang of it."

"Is that so?" Viperpaw grumbled as she bit into her mouse and began to chew. "I hadn't noticed."

Dovepaw didn't flinch. Her eyes gleamed with worry and sympathy as she looked down at Viperpaw. "I've heard what the others say about you and your fur." She meowed quietly, her voice laced with concern. "They...don't think that having Beetlestar make you an apprentice was the right thing to do."

Hot anger pulsed beneath her pelt but Viperpaw forced herself to take another bite of the mouse, the flavor less delicious than before.

"I don't think your pelt means anything about your personality, though." Dovepaw went on, rushing on her words as though she could sense the she-cat's anger. "Your actions will shape the cat you are."

Viperpaw pushed away her half-eaten meal, forcing herself to swallow and glare up at Dovepaw. "Are you done with your speech?" She snapped, watching as she winced. Something sparked in her chest, and she couldn't identify what it was. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep before training tomorrow."

Dovepaw recovered and her face became emotionless; like she'd put on a mask. "Of course." Her voice was void of anything as she padded toward her nest. "Goodnight, Viperpaw."

Chapter Five

A familiar sense of unease filled Viperpaw as she opened her eyes, revealing that she was back in the murky, foggy forest. The fog and mist caked the ground as she quickly rose to her paws, scanning the trees around her. "Rushstar?" She called, hoping she would see the gray-and-white leader.

"Yes, little snake?" Rushstar's voice overhead made her look up to see the leader lounging on a higher branch of a dead tree.

"Why am I here again?" She asked, her tail flicking as she looked the tom over. A few fresh slightly healed wounds added to his patched fur but other than that, he looked just like he had last time. Still as intimidating and mysterious.

Rushstar rose to his paws and leaped down from branch to branch before he stood in front of Viperpaw. "Because, little snake, there are a few of my friends I'd like you to meet." He meowed, his voice smooth like honey.

"Who?" Viperpaw tipped her head to the side, curious. *Who would want to live in a forest like this?* She shuddered at the thought of living longer than a day in this dark forest where the sun never seemed to touch the dead grass.

The tom kinked his tail over his back, his eyes gleaming as he smiled at Viperpaw. "Come with me and I'll show you." He meowed softly and padded ahead of her.

Viperpaw watched him go with a tug trying to pull her after the large leader. What was she doing? She couldn't follow a cat she barely knew! But he seemed...familiar to her. In a strange way, she felt compelled to go along with whatever Rushstar was going to show her. Reluctantly, Viperpaw followed, making sure to look behind her every so often just in case they were being watched or followed.

"The cats you are about to meet are different from you and your Clanmates, little snake." Rushstar said as she fell into step by his side, her ears barely reaching his shoulder. "If you feel at anytime uncomfortable, just tell me, alright?"

Viperpaw nodded and looked ahead, seeing several silhouettes of cats tangled together in the distance. "What are they doing?" She whispered, looking up at Rushstar in slight fear.

"Training," he answered, his tail flicking around her as he guided her toward the cats. As they got closer, Viperpaw's ears pricked at the sounds of snarling and growling from the two cats. Or was there three? "Amberscar! Patchpelt!" Rushstar called, causing the sound to cease.

A few fox-lengths away, the dark bushes rustled and two she-cats, one larger and fluffier than the other, stepped out of the foliage, their eyes gleaming.

"Ah," mused the smaller of the two as she gazed at Viperpaw with mild curiousity in her teal eyes. "You must be Viperpaw, right? Rushstar has told me a lot about you."

The apprentice cocked her head at the she-cat, taking a few mental notes at the scars that scattered her pelt. "Who are you?" She asked, slightly scared of the ginger-and-white she-cat that towered over her accomplice.

"My name is Patchpelt, Viperpaw." Meowed the tortoiseshell as she flashed her eyes over at Rushstar. "We've been waiting for a long time for you to show up. Especially since you were born all those moons ago."

Viperpaw's heart thumped in her chest as she stared at the two warriors. At least, she *thought* they were warriors. They had obviously seen battle and their names were similiar to that of a Clan cat. She shifted her gaze to the larger she-cat, who was staring at her with a dark interest that made her whimper.

Rushstar pressed his flank against her, making her relax slightly.

"Don't worry, Viperpaw." He purred as he glared at the ginger-and-white she-cat with sharp eyes. "Amberscar, this is my niece. Viperpaw will be training with us."

Viperpaw stared at her uncle in shock and she scrambled away from the three older cats. Her fur prickled with unease and suspicion. "Train with you?" She spat the words as though they had a bad taste. "I never agreed to that!"

Rushstar looked at her, his eyes amused. "Don't worry, little snake." He cooed, padding around her and gently pushing her toward the two she-cats. "Training with us will make you a better warrior in your Clan."

Amberscar purred and it sounded like two sticks grinding together. Viperpaw cringed and pressed closer to Rushstar, hoping for comfort. "Come with us every night and we'll teach you the true meaning of being a warrior, Viperpaw."

Viperpaw hesitated and Patchpelt's eyes flashed with anger and annoyance. "Why are we wasting time with this *kitten* instead of training the others?" She demanded, making Viperpaw flinch at her brazen tone.

Rushstar lashed out with a paw and, quick as lightning, struck the tortoiseshell she-cat with his powerful and sharp claws. Blood sprayed the dead grass as Patchpelt stumbled, making Viperpaw gasp. "She is not a kitten, Patchpelt." He growled, his voice unusually deep and angry. "She's useful to us, remember?"

Patchpelt glared at him, hatred pouring into her teal gaze as she whirled around and stalked away. Viperpaw stared after her in shock as she lashed her tail, disappearing into the dark fog.

"So," Amberscar unsheathed her claws and they pricked the grass that crumbled beneath them. "When shall we start training?" She asked, looking to Rushstar.

Rushstar looked at Viperpaw and she realized with a jolt that he was beginning to blur in front of her. "Tomorrow night, since she's starting to wake up." He answered and touched noses with

Viperpaw. "See you then, little snake."

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"Viperpaw?" Dovepaw's mew roused Viperpaw from her sleep. She was covered in what felt like a fluffy, soft cloud that wrapped around her comfortingly.

Alarmed, she leaped up and spun around, shocked to find Dovepaw sitting in her nest. Her cheeks were flushed a dark shade of pink and she refused to meet Viperpaw's eyes.

"What are you doing in *my* nest?" Viperpaw's voice was high-pitched, making her squeak mid-sentence.

Dovepaw flattened her ears to her head, her cheeks deepening in color. "I-...uh...I-...."

"So flustered you can't speak, huh?" Viperpaw lashed her tail, her ears starting to burn in anger and embarrassment.

The older apprentice straightened at her embarrassed look, the twinkle in her eyes dimming slightly. "You were whimpering in your sleep," she explained and Viperpaw winced. "It woke me up and I went to your nest to calm you down."

"So you decided *cuddling* me would be the best solution other than waking me up?" Viperpaw watched as Dovepaw rose to her paws and looked down at her.

Dovepaw flushed again and she shifted her paws, trying to avoid Viperpaw's gaze.

Before Viperpaw could speak, her mentor's voice rang in her ears, echoing throughout the den. "Viperpaw!" Cursedblood sounded angry and he clearly didn't want to be kept waiting for long.

"Coming!" Viperpaw called back, her eyes pinning Dovepaw to the ground as she whirled around and padded toward the den entrance.

"Viperpaw, wait." Dovepaw's paw flattened her tail to the ground

and she let out a small hiss, turning to peer over her shoulder. "I'm sorry-"

Viperpaw cut her off with a sharp remark. "Drop it, Dovepaw." Her tone made Dovepaw's body go rigid and she smirked. "Unless you want to end up with shredded ears while you sleep." Without another fleeting look at the older apprentice, Viperpaw slipped out of the den.

Chapter Six

"Try again, Viperpaw." Cursedblood urged as she missed the leaf she tried to land on for the third time. Viperpaw groaned and looked over her shoulder at her mentor, annoyance pulsing in her paws.

"When can we move on?" Viperpaw complained, her tail lashing back and forth as she rose to her full height. Her dream in the foggy forest still fresh in her mind. "This is boring."

Cursedblood's eyes flashed with irritation and Viperpaw quietly winced. "Hunting practice is valuable to us, Viperpaw." He retorted sharply. "Besides, you'll make a fine hunter in the long run."

And squirrels with hop into the fresh-kill pile. She thought with a snort of anger. Nonetheless, she rolled her eyes and focused on the leaf once more, determined to flatten it beneath her light silver paws. She narrowed her eyes, claws unsheathing as she began to stalk towards the light brown spotted leaf.

There was a flash of movement in the corner of her eyes and Viperpaw faltered, surprised. *Is it one of the hunting patrols?* She wondered, envious of the cats who didn't have to practice hunting. Turning her attention back to her target, she sprang, her paws and claws outstretched as she headed for the leaf.

Another flash of movement distracted her and she slammed against the ground, missing the leaf again and she heard Cursedblood grunt in surprise.

"Don't worry, Viperpaw." Her mentor padded to her side, his voice defeated as he met her eyes, his own glinting with disappointment that sliced through Viperpaw. "We'll try again tomorrow."

Despite the warrior nudging her shoulder with his nose, Viperpaw stared into the forest beyond the mossy clearing where they were training. She searched the oaks for any sign of life other than the foliage that was turning brown, orange, red, and yellow. *I saw*

something, she thought. *I swear I did.*

Cursedblood glanced at her in confusion that was mixed with irritation. "Viperpaw? What's the matter?" He lifted his gaze to follow hers, scanning the treeline.

"I-I saw something." She meowed, aware of how pathetic her voice sounded. "In the trees."

Cursedblood twitched his ear. "It was probably nothing," he mewed and flicked his tail. "Come on, let's head back to camp. I want to catch the next hunting patrol."

Viperpaw watched the trees a moment longer before looking at her mentor. As Cursedblood padded in the direction of the camp, Viperpaw followed him with her eyes, watching as he walked away, a spring in his step. She let out a sigh and, with great effort, began to pad after him.

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Viperpaw sighed as she nudged Amberkit onto her paws, watching as the young kit whirled on her heels and leaped at her face. The kit planted her front paws on the apprentice's muzzle, claws scratching Viperpaw's face. The she-cat winced and shook the small cat off her muzzle, watching as she toppled onto her back with a squeak.

If Badgerstorm doesn't come back with her prey soon, she won't have kits to come back to. She thought as Cloudkit chewed on her right ear and Thunderkit pounced on her tail. Tiny claws sank into her flesh, piercing through her fur as she stumbled back and fell onto her side. Defeated, she allowed the kits to crawl over her as she closed her eyes, helpless.

"Hey, kits!" A voice made all three kittens freeze and Viperpaw opened one eye to see Dovepaw watching on in amusement. Her left front paw was lifted, claws unsheathed, and a wad of green moss dangled from the tips. She had all three of the kits' attention and she took her sweet time as she gazed at Viperpaw. "Why trample poor newbie when you could play with something other than a piece of fresh-kill?" With a broad smile on the older

apprentice's face, she threw the moss ball to her left and the kits hurled themselves after it.

Viperpaw groaned and rolled onto her paws, pushing herself up to glare at Dovepaw. "You waited," she grumbled, shaking out her pelt. "Why did you wait?"

Dovepaw snorted. "You think I'd let seeing you flattened by three kits pass up?"

"Very funny," Viperpaw growled, licking a paw and wiping her muzzle where Amberkit sank her claws into her flesh.

"I know," Dovepaw meowed silkily, striding toward the younger apprentice, her eyes gleaming. She dropped into a crouch, her tail flicking behind her.

"What are you doing?" Viperpaw asked, confused and annoyed at the she-cat's stupid antics.

"Playing," Dovepaw answered and leaped at Viperpaw, swiping a paw of sheathed claws at her face.

Viperpaw jerked back in surprise. "Playing? We're apprentices, not kits!"

"So?" The older apprentice snorted and lashed her tail. "You're fresh out of the nursery and yet you act like a senior warrior."

"I do not!" Viperpaw retorted, her claws unsheathing and sinking into the ground. Her tail quivered with anger at the apprentice's remark.

"You do too!" Dovepaw flashed back at her. "Since you got your apprentice name, you've done nothing but be exhausted after training and be a grouch. You need to loosen up a bit, Viper."

"It's Viper*paw*." She corrected sharply. "And I'm just trying to focus on being a good warrior."

"When you're an apprentice still?" Dovepaw shook her head. "You have a lot to learn, Viperpaw. And your first lesson is to stop being

a pain in my backside!"

Viperpaw felt her fur bristle with indignation but an alarmed yowl made her turn her head to see Rainfall staring out into the forest from the Highledge. Abandoning Dovepaw without a thought, she raced toward the elder. Skirting between the boulders at the side of the ancient stone, she clawed her way toward the she-cat, her paw pads scraping painfully on the hard stone. "What's wrong?" She panted, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the former leader as she followed her gaze.

"Intruders in the forest!" Rainfall yelped as she unsheathed her claws to point at the trees. "They're heading for the camp!"

Spottedshine, who had been sunning himself outside the warrior's den, leaped to his paws. "Protect the camp!" He yowled as the thorn barrier quivered and cats burst into the peaceful clearing.

At the lead was a light-gray she-cat, letting out a battle cry before leaping at Spottedshine, who grappled her with his claws. Behind them, more cats spilled into the camp, all battle-ready and angry.

"The kits!" Dovepaw yelped. Viperpaw looked over to see the apprentice holding Thunderkit in her jaws, trembling as she stood in front of the nursery, her eyes fixed on Amberkit and Cloudkit as they struggled to avoid being trampled.

With a howl of anger, Viperpaw leaped down from the Highledge, pain flaring up her legs as she landed. Forcing the pain to the side, she raced for the kits, intent on picking up Cloudkit first and then Amberkit.

Before she could reach the two kits, she collided with a black and brown she-cat. She rolled in the dust, managing to find her footing as she faced the warrior, breathing hard as she glared at the warrior. "Why are you here?" She demanded, claws unsheathing.

The she-cat's lips curled into a snarl. "Don't act like you don't know anything, you pathetic mousebrain!" She spat back, lunging forward and aiming a blow to Viperpaw's shoulder.

When she hit her mark, Viperpaw lashed out and clumsily scored her claws against her cheek. The she-cat hissed in annoyance and reared on her hind legs, batting Viperpaw to the side with a forepaw.

Viperpaw groaned in pain as she spotted Cloudkit and Amberkit pressed together in a small heap, trembling and scared. Anger filled Viperpaw from ears to tail tip as she snarled at the warrior. "You idiot!" She growled, her ear flicking to the two scared kits. The enemy warrior glanced at the two bundles and her eyes widened, sheathing her claws and rising to her full height. "I'm barely out of the nursery and you decide to attack our camp while there are kits playing outside? Shame on you and your Clan!"

The she-cat looked ashamed and lowered her head a bit. "I didn't want this, apprentice." She meowed quietly, her ears flicking back. Irritation and anxiety pulsed beneath Viperpaw's paws, impatiently glancing at the two kits. "It was Blizzardstar's idea to attack."

"Then round up your flea-bitten Clanmates and *leave*!" Viperpaw didn't let the warrior respond as she spun on her heels and ran toward the two kits. Amberkit was trying to run to the nursery, leaving Cloudkit behind to fend for herself. Seeing that the ginger-and-white kit was so close to safety, Viperpaw focused on Cloudkit, determined to scoop her up and hurry to the nursery.

However, a black-and-white spotted tom saw Cloudkit and, without hesitating, grasped her by the scruff before charging toward the camp entrance.

"Cloudkit!" Viperpaw wailed, pushing herself to run faster to catch up with the spotted warrior. She was too late as the tom raced out of the camp, leaving the noises of battle behind him with Badgerstorm's daughter dangling from his jaws.

Chapter Seven

Viperpaw hurled herself at a pale blue-gray tabby she-cat, slashing her face with her claws before springing away to avoid her retaliation. Claws sank into her haunches and she yowled in agony as another cat tore at her flesh.

"Argh!" Viperpaw hissed and her tail arched in pain as the cat swatted at her legs.

"Viperpaw!" Darkfang's angered yowl and thundering paws let Viperpaw know that the deputy had brought help. "Get off her, you mangy worm!" The tabby deputy spat as she tackled the cat clinging to her haunches.

"Duck!" The voice of Cursedblood was like birdsong to Viperpaw's ears as she dropped to the ground, watching her mentor soar over her head and lock into battle with the pale tabby. "Viperpaw, get to the elder's den!" He hollered as he raked his claws against the tabby's cheek.

Without responding, Viperpaw did as she was told and sprinted toward the elder's den, where three large cats were tussling with Rainfall and Gorsespring. One of them was a brown tabby tom, a silver-and-white tabby she-cat, and a smaller dark brown tabby she-cat.

Seeing that the two elders were faring fine with the larger of the three, Viperpaw launched herself at the smaller dark tabby, ripping her away from the elders and throwing her to the ground.

She scrambled to her paws, her eyes ablaze with anger as a cut above her left eye began to bleed. She shook her head, spraying blood droplets onto the ground. "You mouse-heart!" She spat and darted toward Viperpaw, knocking her to the ground and pinning her. "You'll pay for that!"

Viperpaw hissed and spat in her face, lifting a paw and slashing the she-cat's eyes. The cat yowled in agony and Viperpaw clawed at her belly, shoving her away before scoring a blow onto her muzzle. Viperpaw reared on her hind legs, only giving the she-cat a window to slash at her exposed soft flesh. Wailing in pain, she dropped onto all fours and backed away from the dark brown tabby she-cat.

"Cats of ShadowClan!" Beetlestar's booming voice made Viperpaw's fur stand on end as she turned her head to see her leader atop the Highledge, shoving the body of a limp pale ginger cat off the peak. The cat slammed into the ground with a loud *thunk!*

Gasps of shock and horror racked the clearing and Viperpaw pricked her ears, slightly sickened at her leader's action. "What's going on?" She whispered.

"You attack our camp without reason!" Beetlestar snarled, lashing his tail as he glared around at the rival Clan. "Leave and don't come back!"

"Blizzardstar!" The cry of the warrior she had fought earlier made her bristle as she watched the she-cat race to her fallen leader. "She's dead!"

"Serves her right!" Spat Viperpaw as she glared at the warrior. "One of your Clanmates stole one of our kits!"

"*What*?!" An outraged shriek from one of the ShadowClan warriors was loud as they stepped forward. The cat was a black tom with pale green eyes as they flashed to the apprentice. "Liar! ShadowClan doesn't steal kits!"

Viperpaw bared her teeth and snarled at the warrior, her wounds burning like fury but her anger burned brighter. "Then where is Badgerstorm's kit?"

A wail from the nursery made it clear that the queen had heard her. "Where's Cloudkit?" She cried, racing into the nursery, her shoulder bleeding and clumps of fur missing from her flanks. Her hazel eyes were alight with fear and anger as she got in the black tom's face, spitting. "Give me back my daughter or I'll claw your eyes out!"

"Badgerstorm!" Wildrapid darted forward and wedged between his mate and the other warrior. His eyes were frantic as he guided her away back to the nursery.

The black tom curled his lip as he watched them go. He turned his eyes back to Viperpaw. "Do you have any proof of that?" He challenged.

"The missing kit is proof enough, Lightningstreak!" Spat the voice of Venombranch as she stood by Minnowwind. "I saw Spotpelt running off with Cloudkit whilst I was being pinned by Ebonydust!"

Beetlestar lashed his tail as Blizzardstar sluggishly rose to her paws, staggering as the flow of blood thickened from where her neck had split. "S-ShadowClan steals n-no kits." She croaked, looking weakly up at the tom.

Beetlestar glared at her. "Apparently not, Blizzardstar." He growled and lifted his dull yellow gaze to his warriors. "I want five warriors to follow the ShadowClan cats on their way to their camp. Come back with Cloudkit in one piece and safe." He ordered.

Wildrapid stepped forward. "I'll go with the patrol to find my daughter." He announced, leaving no room for argument. He sent an angered glare over at Lightningstreak and Viperpaw flattened her ears. "I don't trust disloyal cats."

Lightningstreak bristled and got into Wildrapid's face, snarling. "Disloyal, am I?" He challenged and unsheathed his claws. "Why don't we see who will last the longest? Whoever survives is the most loyal to their Clan."

Viperpaw held her breath, claws unsheathing to leap at the enemy warrior. She glanced at Beetlestar, who was watching the two toms with a mildly interested look on his face. *What's he going to do?* Viperpaw wondered if her leader would break the fight up or let them battle.

"Wildrapid, no!" Spottedshine raced toward his son, eyes wide and frantic as he pushed Wildrapid away from Lightningstreak. He stood between the two battle-hungry toms, tail lashing as he held his son's

gaze. "Think of your kits that are watching." He urged.

Wildrapid barely reacted to his father's words as he glared passed him at Lightningstreak. "I can show a *kittypet* how a *real* warrior tears enemies apart." He sneered.

Lightningstreak narrowed his eyes and let out a low, warning growl. "Is that the worst you've got, Wildrapid?" He taunted, tail lashing.

Unable to stand the tension between the two warriors, Viperpaw shot forward and knocked both toms off their paws by slamming her shoulder painfully into both warriors. As she skidded to a halt, breathing hard, her ear flicked. "Are you two done, now?" She challenged as the others in the camp watched on in amazement. "Because Cloudkit still needs our help."

Darkfang blinked and stepped toward Viperpaw. "You're right, we need to send out those five warriors right away." She turned to the ThunderClan cats who were still standing without major injuries. "Orchidfall, Dovepaw, Venombranch, Mistpaw, and Shadowstep, escort the ShadowClan warriors back to their camp and bring back Cloudkit."

The five cats nodded in silence as they headed for the camp entrance, waiting patiently as the ShadowClan warriors gathered their wounded and headed for the thorn tunnel.

Wildrapid whipped around to glare at Darkfang, eyes blazing. "Why not send me?" He demanded as Lightningstreak brushed against him with a smug look on his face. "Cloudkit is my daughter!"

Darkfang regarded the tom's words with a flick of her ear. "I'm aware of that, Wildrapid. But we need you here instead of trying to pick fights with ShadowClan warriors."

Wildrapid lashed his tail once, shoulder fur bristling into spikes. *He badly wants to go to ShadowClan's camp.* Viperpaw shivered as the patched warrior flexed his claws. *But for what? Wildrapid just wants to fight.* "Yes, Darkfang." He growled through gritted teeth. His tail lashed once more before he stormed off toward the warrior's den, Echopaw hurrying after him with her jaws full of herbs.

Darkfang let out a sigh and nodded to the ShadowClan warriors as they began to leave. She rested her eyes on Dustynose as the medicine cat shuffled from cat to cat treating injuries. "Do you want the injured to be in your den?" She prompted.

Dustynose shook her head and let out a weary sigh. "No. I just need some time and for all cats injured to stay still." She padded toward the nearest warrior, Thrushpool, who had a torn ear and a scratch above her left eye.

Viperpaw watched the chosen five cats leave with the ShadowClan cats and looked over her shoulder, where Poppypaw was leaning against Sagepaw, her shoulder bleeding heavily from a gash that refused to stop bleeding. She felt a pang of envy as Applefrost padded around her daughter, speaking worriedly as Poppypaw blinked sluggishly. Bile rose in her throat as she flexed her paws, claws scraping against the ground. *Chosen one.* She thought with a scoff.

"Viperpaw," the apprentice jumped at her name, turning around as Echopaw blinked in embarrassment.

"Yes?" She asked, confused. *I never talk to Echopaw. In fact, I never see her.* Viperpaw stared at the white medicine cat apprentice silently.

Echopaw cleared her throat, her cheeks flushed a shade of pink. "I-I need to check your wounds." She muttered, stumbling over her words as she met Viperpaw's curious stare.

"Oh, of course." Viperpaw mewed awkwardly, sitting down and flicking her tail over her front paws. As she worked, Viperpaw's mind wandered to Rushstar. How was the leader doing? What did he do when she wasn't meeting with him? Was it true that he led a Clan unlike the five around the lake? She shivered, causing Echopaw to glance down at her eyes from patching the cut above her left eye.

"Are you okay?" Asked the white apprentice, her ear flicking.

Viperpaw blinked. "I'm fine," she answered shortly. She didn't need

the apprentice's worry to get in the way of her thoughts.

Echopaw didn't push further as she moved onto the slash across the shoulder where the black and brown she-cat's claws had sliced through her flesh and fur. "I saw you heading for Cloudkit and Amberkit," she meowed quietly, chewing some green herbs into a pulp and smearing it into her wound. Viperpaw gritted her teeth, claws sinking into the ground as she nodded. "I saw the cat that took Cloudkit," she went on. "It seemed planned."

Viperpaw frowned, wincing as the cut above her eye began to sting from the herbs. "Planned?" She echoed, puzzled. "Planned how?"

Echopaw shrugged. "I do not know," she answered truthfully. "But I believe ShadowClan *wanted* to take one of our kits and then defend themselves as being innocent."

"Those are very out-there accusations, Echopaw." Commented Beetlestar as he stood behind the apprentice. The white medicine cat apprentice froze and faced the leader, trembling.

"B-Beetlestar, I-" She whispered, but the leader whisked his tail across her mouth, silencing her.

"Do not fear, Echopaw," he soothed, and Viperpaw's shoulders tensed as he looked at her. "I didn't see Spotpelt taking Cloudkit, but I'm sure they'll have a pawful of excuses."

Viperpaw snorted, her tail lashing. "I'm sure they will," she muttered and rose to her paws, tail flicking. As Echopaw tried to stop her, she padded toward the apprentice den, ducking inside. The first pelt that glowed in the darkness was Poppypaw's, red-orange fur seeming to shine in the dark gloom. "Hey, Poppypaw." She meowed, suddenly exhausted from the fight with ShadowClan.

Poppypaw jumped, whirling around with an alarmed look in her bright green eyes. When she realized who it was, she relaxed and murmured a greeting.

Viperpaw curled her lip and frowned. What was wrong with her

sister? *Did she get too badly hurt in the fight?* "What's the matter?" She asked, padding toward her with worry and concern in her eyes. "Are you hurt?"

Poppypaw's eyes flashed and Viperpaw winced as she saw the glint of her claws in a shaft of sunlight that slit through the bramble roof. "Leave me alone!" She hissed, her teeth bared as she glared at Viperpaw.

Viperpaw flinched, but her shoulder fur began to bristle with anger as she returned her glare. "I'm just trying to be nice!" She flashed back sharply. She didn't want to fight with her sister, but she didn't want to be disrespected by her littermate.

Poppypaw snarled at her sister, rising to her paws and lashing her tail. Her teeth were bared and she flittered her gaze over Viperpaw, her eyes slits of anger. "Don't even try it!" She retorted. "You haven't spoken to me since we were kits and all you have time for is Dovepaw!"

Viperpaw gasped, her eyes wide. "What?!" She scoffed, her cheeks growing warm.

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about!" Poppypaw roared, her voice laced with anger. "Dovepaw is all you think about, not your kin!"

Viperpaw flattened her ears and she felt them start to burn. "I *don't* know what you're talking about, Poppypaw!" She spat angrily. The fur along her spine rippled and she unsheathed her claws.

The red-orange tabby apprentice launched herself at Viperpaw, claws, and paws outstretched as she tackled her sister. Viperpaw let out an enraged shriek and fell onto her back, pain sparking along her spine.

Poppypaw slashed at her ears and Viperpaw yelped in pain, blood running down the nicks. The scarlet river ran down the side of her face, blinding her in one eye as she tried to defend off her littermate. She dipped her head and tried to sink her white fangs into her throat, but Viperpaw threw her off and scrambled to her

paws.

"What is the matter with you?" Viperpaw yowled as Poppypaw faced her, her green eyes wild with fury and hatred. "We were close as kits! What happened to you, sister?"

"You are no sister of mine!" Poppypaw shrieked and lunged for her again, slashing her flank with sharp claws.

Viperpaw yowled in agony and stumbled, blood streaking down her side and dripping onto the den floor. *I can't fight my sister!* She thought despairingly as she turned to face her sister once more.

"What in StarClan's name is going on?" The enraged shriek of her father made Viperpaw freeze and spin around. Scarredbelly was staring at his daughters in shock and horror.

While she was distracted, Poppypaw sprang onto her back, knocking her to the ground as her sister snarled above her. "You always treasured her!" Poppypaw howled, staring at her father with a wave of blistering anger and exasperation. "You can only love *me*!"

"Poppypaw, stop!" Scarredbelly wailed and darted toward his daughters, his claws unsheathing reluctantly. He stood in front of his kits, eyes wide and afraid, unsure of what to do.

"Get her off of me!" Viperpaw growled, looking up at her father pleadingly.

Poppypaw shoved her face into the ground, snarling. "Silence!" She snapped and looked up at Scarredbelly sweetly. "Come now, father, surely you wouldn't lay a claw on your only daughters."

"He won't," growled the voice of Applefrost as she stood in the den entrance, tears streaming down her face. "But I will!" She raced forward, claws unsheathed. Viperpaw gasped as her mother slammed into Poppypaw, making her fly back with a grunt of surprise.

Viperpaw scrambled to her paws and Scarredbelly shot to her side,

nosing her from ears to tail tip. She fell against her father, whimpering.

"Are you okay?" He whispered, licking her around the ears. "Did she hurt you?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle," Viperpaw replied quietly and sank into her father's pelt. She looked over at Applefrost, who raked her claws across Poppypaw's face with a hiss.

Applefrost seemed torn between the love for her daughter and the protectiveness of a mother that burned in her heart. Viperpaw winced as blood from her sisters' face dripped to the ground. "You're my daughter!" Her mother screeched. "I went through the agony of bearing you!" She flung herself forward, Poppypaw falling beneath her unsheathed claws. She trembled as sobbing wracked her shoulders as she raised a paw of claws. "Goodbye, Poppyfur." She rasped and slashed her claws across Poppypaw's throat.

Viperpaw watched in sick horror as Poppypaw gasped, blood leaping out of her throat and splattering onto her mother's bright tabby fur. Her bright green eyes slid to her and for a moment, ever so brief, was just how she had remembered her: playful and happy. Then, a split second later, the light died and she fell limp. Her tail twitched once, her paws jerked, and she convulsed, but then she was still.

Chapter Eight

Viperpaw stared at her sister's unmoving body in shock and disgust, unable to form words as Applefrost sobbed, flopping down on the motionless form of her daughter. *Poppypaw's dead.* A wave of nausea washed over her, making her stagger and fall against Scarredbelly, who was deathly still, trembling slightly.

"P-Poppypaw..." He whispered, tears making his fur wet and dark as he stared in horror and grief at his mate and dead daughter. "Y-you killed her." His voice shook as he looked at Applefrost as though seeing her for the first time.

Viperpaw looked at her mother, a mixture of emotion filling her from ears to tail tip. Distress, relief, anger, betrayal, grief, disgust, and shock swirled behind her eyes and deep within her belly.

Pawsteps sounded behind Scarredbelly and Viperpaw looked over her shoulder to see Darkfang and Dustynose watching the family in horror. The deputy's eyes slid to Viperpaw's shoulder and ear before slipping to Poppypaw and Applefrost, her green gaze widening.

"Great StarClan," whispered Dustynose as she raised a paw in shock. "What's happened?"

Scarredbelly dropped to his knees, a sob erupting from his throat as he shook. Viperpaw was shocked that her father, who she saw as a great warrior that felt nothing but pride, began to cry for his dead kit. "Poppypaw, no!" He wailed.

Applefrost turned around to face her mate and daughter, her eyes glassy and sad. "S-Scarredbelly, I-" she whispered but Scarredbelly hissed.

"You killed her!" He growled, rising to his paws with his tail lashing behind him. Viperpaw scrambled back, being shielded by Darkfang and Dustynose as her father snarled at his mate. "You kill your own daughter! How could you?" Scarredbelly trembled with rage and

grief and Viperpaw wondered if he would strike Applefrost.

Applefrost's eyes lit up with alarm and fear as she opened her mouth. "I-I had to!" She protested, though her effort was weak, her voice strained. "Sh-She was going to kill Viperpaw!"

"*Silence!*" Scarredbelly spat, his voice hostile as he glared with cold orange eyes as his mate. "You cannot possibly expect my forgiveness for killing my daughter, Applefrost." His voice was icy, as though a blanket of ice had frozen on top of his once warm, welcoming voice.

Applefrost flinched and looked at her paws, which were stained by the blood of her daughter. "I-I understand," she whispered and quickly hurried out of the den, Viperpaw staring after her.

Scarredbelly rushed to Poppypaw's side, Viperpaw following with a little hesitation. He rolled his dead daughter onto her back, his eyes watering as he pressed his forehead against Poppypaw's. "You died just as Poppyfur did, little one." He whispered. "With honor."

Darkfang cleared her throat and Viperpaw turned around. "I'll report this to Beetlestar right away," she meowed, though her eyes betrayed how much she was shaking inside as she padded away.

Dustynose fixed Viperpaw with a soft look. "Come on, my dear," she meowed gently, reaching out with a paw toward the traumatized apprentice. "Let's get you patched up."

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"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting." Beetlestar's solemn voice made Viperpaw look up from her untouched mouse, her throat dry. She didn't have an appetite like the rest of her oblivious Clan. They ate their prey without knowing the death of Poppypaw.

Dustynose, who was staying close with the apprentice, lifted her head and sighed. "Come on, Viperpaw." Her voice was shaking, though she hid her emotions well. "Let's see what Beetlestar has to say."

Following the medicine cat with her ears, head, and tail down, Viperpaw sat down next to Dustynose. Beeltestar was perched on the Highledge, a dark look in his dull yellow eyes.

"Cats of ThunderClan, death has struck us once again in the heart of our Clan." He announced and Viperpaw bit back the sob that built in her throat. Some cats around her gasped and watched their leader through wide eyes. "Poppypaw, who had tried to kill her sister, Viperpaw, hunts with StarClan."

Murmurs of shock and grief made their way into the air, making Viperpaw burn with sorrow at the mention of her sister's name.

Beetlestar ducked his head in sadness. "Applefrost took her life to save Viperpaw's." He went on, his eyes shifting to the queen. "Applefrost, please step forward." He ordered, his voice soft.

Applefrost padded forward, her eyes dark and unreadable and Viperpaw curled her lip in anger. *Cold-hearted murderer!* She screeched silently. *You killed your daughter, my sister. You deserve to suffer.*

"Applefrost," her leader went on. "I, Beetlestar, leader of ThunderClan hereby sentence you to exile. If any of my warriors find you on my territory, they have my permission to kill you."

Applefrost gasped in shock, her eyes wide. "Y-you can't exile me!" She wailed and Viperpaw lashed her tail.

Dustynose hissed, her eyes sparkling. "Surely he wouldn't exile her while she's expecting kits!"

Viperpaw stared at the medicine cat in shock. "Kits?" She yelped, a bit too loudly as her Clanmates turned to stare at her in confusion. The apprentice shot to her paws and rushed at her mother, who watched in fear as two warriors, Sweetpool and Goldenstripe, blocked her path and the teeth of Spottedshine held her back. "Traitor!" She spat at Applefrost, who gaped at her. Tears began to stream down her cheeks but she didn't care. "You're trying to replace Poppypaw but you can't! You never loved her or me! You never have and you never will!"

"Hold back a little, tiger," hissed Sweetpool as she looked the apprentice in the eyes. "Your sister's dead already, do you want your mother dead as well?"

Viperpaw glared at Sweetpool, her blood boiling as she turned her angered gaze to her mother as she cowered back like a kit. "If it means I'll get closure," she snarled, claws unsheathed. "Then yes." She shoved the warriors off and with a final snarl at her mother, she stormed off.

"Viperpaw!" The voice of her mentor called after her, but she only lashed her tail once to indicate that she'd heard Cursedblood. "Viperpaw, come back!"

The apprentice whirled around, her eyes blazing as she glared at her mentor. Cursedblood stopped, his eyes narrowed into slits as she parted her jaws. "Go away and leave me alone!"

"The meeting is not over yet," he replied, his voice tight with fury. The tom's pale tabby pelt was bristling, each hair laced with anger and grief. "Come back to listen to Beetlestar."

"Why should I?" Viperpaw snapped, her claws unsheathing and digging into the ground as she held her mentor's burning glare. "It's Applefrost's fault my sister is dead! I don't have to listen to her excuses."

Cursedblood forced his fur to lay flat and he took a pace toward his apprentice. "Applefrost is expecting Scarredbelly's kits," he meowed as he approached Viperpaw. "They'll be your siblings and your kin."

"Great," she snorted. "Now there will be more of Poppypaw's replacements." Viperpaw lashed her tail and flattened her ears. Whatever her mentor had to say, she didn't want to hear it. *It's not like* I *killed Poppypaw.*

Cursedblood let out a growl and flicked his ear. "Just listen to the rest of what Beetlestar has to say and then you can go to your nest." He meowed, his eyes flashing.

"I'll listen from the den entrance," Viperpaw sniffed, her nose

pointing to the sky as she glared at her mentor.

"Very well." Cursedblood turned around and padded out of the den, Viperpaw following but stopping just outside the den. She sat down, her pelt prickling as her Clanmates turned to look at her warily. Digging her claws into the ground, she glared at them in anger, making them avert their gazes from hers.

Beetlestar cleared his throat and Viperpaw looked up at the leader. "I will allow you to remain in ThunderClan until your kits have been made apprentices." He decided and went on before any cat could object. "Until then, you will stay in the nursery and not leave the camp."

Viperpaw watched as her mother lowered her head and she curled her lip. "I won't forget your mercy, Beetlestar." She meowed. "Thank you."

The tortoiseshell tom blinked down at her, but he didn't say anything else as he leaped down from the ledge and disappeared into his den, Darkfang rushing in behind him.

Scarredbelly approached his mate with a stormy glint in his orange eyes. "Is it true?" He demanded, his voice low. "Are you expecting kits?"

Viperpaw had to pad forward to hear her mother's reply as the Clan dispersed.

"It's true, Scarredbelly," Applefrost answered quietly, unable to meet her mate's eyes. "They're yours." She added hastily.

Viperpaw's father narrowed his eyes. "I should hope so," he grunted and flicked his tail. "I will be a father to these kits, but I will not be your mate any longer."

Applefrost gasped and she looked up at the tabby tom in horror. "W-what?" She meowed, her voice small as she gazed up at Scarredbelly. "Wh-why not?"

Scarredbelly regarded her with cold orange eyes. "You killed Poppypaw," he answered bluntly. "I cannot be the mate of a

murderer."

The red-orange tabby she-cat looked at her paws, in shock as fat tears rolled down her cheeks. "Please," she begged. "Please reconsider."

"No," the tom's voice was as cold as ice. "These kits will grow up without the knowledge of what their mother did to their sister. They will be as oblivious for as long as possible. When you are forced to leave, I will tell them the truth."

Applefrost looked shattered as she looked at her now former mate. "Scarredbelly..." She reached out with a paw, but the dusty brown tabby warrior was already padding across the clearing to the warrior's den, without looking back at his former mate.

Chapter Nine

Viperpaw opened her eyes, not at all surprised to find herself in the foggy forest once again. The pain of losing her sister was still fresh in her heart as she rose to her paws. Half a moon ago, Dawnslash gave birth to a rather large litter of kits. Four kits squirming at her belly seemed to take up the entire nursery. So much so, in fact, that some of the warriors had to make an addition to the den.

Viperpaw and the rest of the Clan were surprised the she-cat had survived the kitting. Her kits were rather large despite how early they had born. Dawnslash was strong during her kitting, no matter how loud and painful her screeching were. Nonetheless, Dawnslash named her kits Curlkit, Ferretkit, Scorchkit, and Swiftkit. They were odd names, Viperpaw knew, but she didn't dare say anything to the queen's face.

Every cat knew Dawnslash was fiercely protective of her family. It was known by all the Clan who the father was, as he was the most excited about his kits being born. Goldenstripe was overjoyed at the thought of being a father. Viperpaw never thought of Dawnslash falling in love with a cat like Goldenstripe. Nevertheless, ThunderClan had four new little warriors and that was the important thing at the moment.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Rushstar slipping through the dark ferns as he approached her. His gray and white pelt was glistening, as though it were wet. As she studied his fur, her eyes widened. The leader's pelt *was* wet, but not with water or mud. It was blood. The scarlet liquid oozed from his coat and dripped from his whiskers. Rushstar didn't seem to care or notice as he stopped in front of Viperpaw, his eyes gleaming.

"Welcome back, little snake." He greeted, his tail flicking. "I see you have been in a fight recently?" Rushstar motioned with his tail tip to her nicked ear where Poppypaw's claws had gone through and through the flesh.

Viperpaw ducked with a sharp hiss. "I'm fine," she growled through clenched teeth. When she straightened once more, she gave the tom a once over. "Why are you bleeding?"

Rushstar glanced at his bloody flanks and let out a purr of amusement. "It's not mine," he replied and jerked his muzzle to the far treeline. "Come on. Your training starts tonight."

Without speaking, the tom padded toward the trees, Viperpaw at his heels. Together they padded into a clearing surrounded by trees and fallen logs. Rushstar faced her and Viperpaw stopped, her heart pounding as she caught sight of his bloodied unsheathed claws.

"Charge at me," the tom rumbled, his voice commanding as he blinked down at the apprentice.

Viperpaw took a small step back, shocked. She barely reached the tom's shoulder with her ears and he expected her to fight him?

Rushstar let out a growl and lashed out with a paw, scratching her muzzle. She gasped, staggering as blood beaded from where he struck her. Looking at him through narrowed eyes, she leaped, paws outstretched as she aimed a blow at his shoulder.

The leader stepped to the side and raked his claws down her flank, making her yowl in pain as she landed wrong and nearly lost her footing. "Too slow," Rushstar commented and lashed his tail. "I thought you'd be better than that."

"I've never had battle training." She growled through gritted teeth, glaring at the tom. "Cut me some slack." Viperpaw lashed her tail and leaped against, this time landing a small scratch against Rushstar's hind leg, drawing very little blood.

Rushstar sank his teeth into her tail, making her yelp and instinctively kick out with a hind leg, striking home and making the tom stumble backward with a hiss of agony.

Spinning on her heels, Viperpaw leaped at him, tackling the larger cat and rolling around with him in a flurry of claws and blood. A claw caught her eye and she felt the flesh tear, blinding her as

blood flooded her left eye. Wincing, she sprang apart from Rushstar, breathing hard as blood soaked her pelt.

Rushstar got to his paws, his eyes shining approvingly. "Good work, Viperpaw." He meowed as though each wound he had didn't hurt. "You did better than I expected." His eyes flitted across her battered body and he flicked his tail. "When you wake, get your wounds checked by Dustynose."

Viperpaw was too exhausted to reply so she nodded and sank to the forest floor, giving in to the tug at her limbs and she closed her eyes. When she opened them, she was curled in her nest in the apprentice's den. She panted and a cat curled around her stirred.

"Viperpaw?" Dovepaw's sleepy voice was soft and groggy as she opened her eyes. In the half-moon in the wake of Poppypaw's death, Dovepaw had moved her nest closer and closer to Viperpaw's. It was so close that the larger apprentice started to sleep in the nest with Viperpaw when she was already asleep. "What's the matter? Why is there blood on your fur?"

Viperpaw quickly flicked her tail over the apprentice's mouth, silencing her. "I'll be right back," she whispered, trying to prevent the she-cat from hearing the pounding of her heart in her chest. "Go back to sleep." Her wounds still burning from her fight with Rushstar, she ducked out of the den and she tasted the air.

The early morning dew tasted sweet and tangy on her tongue and she strode across the clearing toward the medicine cat's den. The sharp smell of herbs cut through her nose and she winced softly, dipping her head and slipping inside. "Dustynose?" She called quietly, not wanting to accidentally wake Echopaw.

There was a sound of a cat stirring in their nest and light green eyes gleamed in the darkness. It was Dustynose. "V-Viperpaw?" She yawned, her voice weary. "What can I help you with this morning?"

Viperpaw felt suddenly very uneasy as she gazed into Dusynose's tired light green gaze. She let out a sigh and flicked her tail. "I'd like to get some injuries treated, Dustynose." She said, her voice quiet.

The medicine cat's eyes stretched as wide as a full-moon, wide awake. "Injuries?" She echoed, astonished. "Why would you have injuries?"

Viperpaw felt doubt claw its way into her heart and she debated walking away without getting her wounds treated. "There are some thorns in my nest and I slept on them." She lied, feeling a stab of guilt when relief flood the she-cat's alarmed gaze.

"It happens to all of us," she meowed, turning her back to the apprentice and padding toward the wall. "Come with me. Be careful not to wake my apprentice."

Viperpaw nodded, padding after the medicine cat passed a snoring Echopaw and sitting down in one of the moss nests at the far corner of the dark den. While she waited, Dustynose sifted through countless herbs, looking for the correct ones to use on the apprentice.

"Were you moving around when you got hurt?" The medicine cat asked as she pulled out some green flowers with yellow buds. "Thorns could carry some infection."

Viperpaw gulped. "I-I guess I was moving around quite a lot," she meowed, her voice reaching a high pitch as she lied.

Whether or not Dustynose caught her lie, she didn't show it as she picked out a few more herbs and cobwebs before approaching Viperpaw. Her eyes gleamed as she spotted the scratch on her muzzle, setting the herbs down gently before picking one leaf up, chewing it, and smearing the pulp onto her scratch.

Viperpaw hissed as the juices seeped into the wound, making it sting like a snake bite. *And I know how* that *feels like.* She thought as she bit her tongue.

Dustynose plastered some cobweb onto her muzzle before moving onto the slash on her shoulder. She hummed while she worked, relaxing Viperpaw to the point where she barely felt the sting as the medicine cat repeated the process several times.

Once she was done, she smiled down at Viperpaw. "All done," she meowed, her voice kind and cheerful. "I'll tell your mentor to keep you on some lighter duties for the next few days while your wounds heal." She meowed and twitched her whiskers. "Meanwhile, you can help around the camp and rest."

Viperpaw dipped her head to the medicine cat and padded passed Echopaw on her way out of the den. The sun was starting to rise above the trees and some cat were in the clearing, clustered around Darkfang and some even ducking into the nursery. She tried to head back to the apprentice's den without being seen, but it failed miserably.

"Viperpaw!" The call of Dovepaw made her freeze, heard pounding in her throat as she turned to look at the older apprentice. Dovepaw trotted toward her, her head and tail held high as she stopped in front of Viperpaw. "You said you'd be right back."

"And I'm going back to my nest," Viperpaw meowed, a bit harshly. "Dustynose is going to tell Cursedblood I can't train for a few days. She told me to go rest."

Dovepaw let out a sigh. "Too bad," she murmured and met her gaze steadily. "I wanted you to see my assessment."

Viperpaw stared at her denmate as though she had sprouted another head or tail. "Assessment as in your *warrior* assessment?" She asked, gawking at the she-cat in shock.

The white and gray tabby apprentice nodded, her chest puffing out with pride. "Orchidfall says I'm more ready than ever to get my warrior name." She meowed and looked at Viperpaw, softening. "But, I'll still visit you in the apprentice's den and while you're training." She added softly.

Viperpaw felt a pang of pain stab her chest as she took in the sight of the large apprentice. Dovepaw was nearly the size of Orchidfall, who wasn't very tall nor short. The fur on her shoulders shielded the muscles that rippled underneath the thin layer of flesh. She was much larger than Viperpaw, of course, but it felt so long ago when she first became an apprentice.

When Poppypaw was still with me. Her mind hissed and she unsheathed her claws, digging them into the ground. She forced a purr of approval and nudged Dovepaw with her nose. "Go do your assessment," she urged, wanting the pain in her chest to stop as soon as possible. "Impress Orchidfall and I'll be here when you get back."

Dovepaw touched noses with Viperpaw, sending sparks down the younger apprentice's back. "I'll be back before you can say mouse!" She promised and raced off to find Orchidfall.

Viperpaw watched her go, her heart thudding in her chest quick enough to outrun a rabbit on WindClan's territory. Pain jabbed her heart like a thorn again and she winced at the velocity. "Mouse," she whispered as Dovepaw disappeared with Mistpaw and Sagepaw out of the camp, their mentors following soon after.

Chapter Ten

Viperpaw sighed as she padded into the clearing, her tail dragging behind her as she searched for Goldenstripe. Why was the tom sleeping in so late? Begrudgingly, after waiting a few heartbeats, she padded toward the warrior's den and poked her head inside. "Goldenstripe?" She called warily. "Are you in here?"

There was a groan from inside the den and the warrior's golden tabby head lifted from a nest in the bramble den. "Viperpaw," he grumbled. "I was chasing a squirrel."

Viperpaw flicked her ear and looked at the tabby warrior. "Come on," she meowed briskly. "Darkfang wants you on the next hunting patrol."

Goldenstripe rose to his paws and stretched, his jaws parted in a yawn. "Do you know who will be going and where we'll be going?" He asked as he flexed each of his paws.

"She said that Thrushpool and Minnowwind were also on the patrol and you were heading to the Sky Oak by the lakeshore," Viperpaw replied and twitched her whiskers as Goldenstripe groaned. "Don't like water much?" She teased.

Goldenstripe shot her a look. "Cats don't belong in the water," he retorted and flicked his tail uncomfortably. "We belong on solid ground and in the trees."

Viperpaw snorted in amusement as the tabby warrior joined her at the den entrance and began to pad toward the ThunderClan deputy. "Tell that to RiverClan and ShadowClan," she meowed and flicked his shoulder with her tail.

She knew that the older warriors who fought with ShadowClan and RiverClan boasted about how they got their rivals stuck in their own territory. Spottedshine especially boasted about how he chased

a RiverClan warrior out of the territory that they fell into the river and had to be fished out by a fellow warrior.

ShadowClan lived in a swamp filled with murky water that made Viperpaw sick. The water was dark and mysterious, making any cat who dare step into it sink below the surface. Viperpaw never saw the violent cats' territory and she hoped she never would. *I never want to be in water.* She thought with a shudder.

Goldenstripe padded next to her and blinked at her. "What are you going to do today?" He asked, his eyes drifting from her muzzle scratch to her shoulder.

Viperpaw shrugged, pain spiking in her shoulder but she bit her tongue to hold back a wince. "Not sure," she replied. "I'll wait for Dovepaw to come back from her assessment and I might spend time with Dawnslash's new litter."

The golden tabby warrior's eyes glowed at the mention of his kits and he nudged her shoulder with his nose. "Are you interested in having kits?" He questioned. While his tone was teasing, Viperpaw couldn't help but shy away from the question.

"I'm...not sure quite yet," she replied quietly and flicked her ear. "Do you mind if I spend time with your kits?" Viperpaw met his eyes, seeing an amused gleam in their light green depths.

"Of course not," he purred. "You can spend your entire life with them and I wouldn't care." Goldenstripe flicked her ear with his tail playfully. "Just make sure they don't get into too much trouble without me."

"Goldenstripe!" Thrushpool's call made the warrior and apprentice look over at the two she-cats standing at the camp entrance. "Come on!"

Goldenstripe whisked his tail. "Wait a second, you impatient badger!" He called back teasingly, and Thrushpool screwed up her face playfully. When he turned his attention back to Viperpaw, he dipped his head. "If Dawnslash threatens to claw their ears off, tell her that it will only make them think it will make them look

cooler." He purred and bounded away, being told off by Minnowwind.

Viperpaw twitched her whiskers and looked over to the nursery, which was alive with kitten squeaks. Heading toward the bramble den, she poked her head inside and saw Dawnslash curled in the corner with her paws over her ears. She smiled and looked over to see Curlkit wrestling with Ferretkit while Scorchkit and Swiftkit cheered.

"Get her, Curlkit!" Jeered Swiftkit, reared on her hind legs as she watched in excitement.

"You've got this, Ferretkit!" Called Scorchkit, padding anxiously around his brother and sister.

Curlkit ducked as his smaller sister lashed out with a paw to his ear and shoved Ferretkit back, making her slide back. Flattening his ears, Curlkit leaped at his sister, paws outstretched. But Ferretkit's size helped her to slither away and she sank her small kit teeth into Curlkit's tail and pulled her larger littermate to the ground.

"Hey!" Complained the silver pointed kit as he batted his sisters' muzzle with a forepaw. "That's not fair!"

Ferretkit lifted her chin triumphantly, her eyes gleaming with the victory of battle. Viperpaw was impressed that the young kit, even at half a moon old, could defeat a kit bigger than her by using her size against him. "It was too!" She argued and sat down, chest puffed out in pride. "You're bigger than me, so I can do what I want to win!"

Curlkit shot his sister a glare and lashed his curly tail in anger. His green eyes flashed with annoyance and he rolled his eyes. "You *always* use your size in *every* argument." He huffed. "You're no fun!"

Ferretkit's neck fur rose and she stuck her tongue out at her brother. "Future Clan leaders aren't supposed to be fun!" She retorted hotly.

Her brother snorted and looked at her, sneering. "You aren't going to be Clan leader," he rebuked. "You'll be a medicine cat and *I'll* be

ThunderClan's leader while you'll be stuck in the herb-smelling den treating *my* warriors."

Though his tone was scathing, Ferretkit didn't back down. It surprised and interested Viperpaw, making her sit down and watch the argument. "Yeah, right!" She snapped angrily. "When I'm leader, you'll have to do all the apprentice duties like changing bedding and picking ticks off Rainfall and Gorsespring!"

"Please stop fighting," begged Scorchkit as he stepped between his arguing siblings, his hazel eyes, nothing like her parents, round with pleading. "Why can't we just play with a ball of moss?"

Curlkit's eyes flashed with anger and he stomped toward Swiftkit, who was batting at a bramble tendril. "Because she won't play fair!" He answered rudely, pointing with a claw at Ferretkit. "She'll shred it like she did last time!"

Ferretkit's light green eyes blazed and she leaped at Curlkit, snarling. "I will not!" She yowled, claws extended.

Curlkit's eyes widened in shock and was bowled off his paws by Ferretkit, coughing as dust kicked up and he was pinned by his sister. "Hey!" He hissed as her claws sank into his chest.

"That's enough!" Hissed Viperpaw and she lunged forward, grasping Ferretkit by the scruff and pulling her off her brother. The kit thrashed in her grip, but the apprentice held on tightly.

"Great StarClan!" Dawnslash's voice sounded from the other side of the den and Viperpaw turned her head to the queen, Ferretkit swinging in her jaws.

"Put me down!" Cried the she-kit as she tried to claw herself away from Viperpaw. "Dawnslash, tell her to put me down!"

Viperpaw shook the kit slightly, shutting her up. Her eyes met Dawnslash, who was looking at Curlkit. "She took playing a bit too far," she meowed and put Ferretkit down, holding her tail down with a paw. "I broke it apart before she could do something bad to Curlkit."

Dawnslash flicked her ear in acknowledgment and looked worriedly at her son, who was shakily getting to his feet. "Are you alright, precious?" She asked, striding to her son and nosing him from ears to tail.

"I'm fine," he mumbled, shooting a glare at his sister. "I'll be fine."

There were cheers behind her and Viperpaw turned her head to see Cloudkit, Amberkit, and Thunderkit trotting into the nursery with their heads and tails high. The three oldest kits were chatting amongst themselves, their eyes shining with pride and excitement.

"What's the news?" Viperpaw asked, padding toward the three-moon-old kits. They were the size of her if a tad shorter.

Cloudkit looked at Viperpaw, her green eyes blazing with joy. "We're being made apprentices today!" She burst out, bouncing on her toes to show her enthusiasm. "When the hunting patrol gets back, we'll be made apprentices!"

Viperpaw felt chill to the bone. Extra paws were good in the chore aspect of being an apprentice, but that meant that Dovepaw would be made a warrior when they got back. She forced a purr of encouragement. "That's great!" Deep down, she wanted to rake her claws across the kits' face, wanting to believe that Dovepaw couldn't leave her alone in the apprentice's den with no kin or friends.

"Viperpaw!" A familiar call from outside the den made her jump and she hurried out of the den, confused. Her ears were pricked and she spotted Dovepaw striding toward her with a spring in her step and a broad smile on her face. "I passed my assessment!"

Pain jabbed her in the heart as she faked a rocky smile. "That's amazing!" She forced a purr and barely listened as Dovepaw explained how she beat her littermates in hunting and sparring. Viperpaw felt hollow. She didn't particularly *like* Dovepaw, but she didn't want her to leave. Although she had to admit, the older apprentice had grown on her since she became an apprentice, but then it felt like seasons until Dovepaw, Mistpaw, and Sagepaw

became warriors. Now, it felt like it was yesterday she became an apprentice.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!" Called Beetlestar, his voice loud and proud.

Dovepaw sprang into the air in excitement like a kit. "It's time!" She meowed and flicked her tail under Viperpaw's chin. "Come on! We have to get the best spot!"

Unable to hold her excitement back for Dovepaw, Viperpaw cracked a smile and bounded after her as she hurried to the clearing. Dovepaw sat down in the front and Viperpaw settled down next to her, looking up at Beetlestar.

"Cats of ThunderClan," Beetlestar looked around at the gathered cats. "We have three apprentices who have completed their warrior training and their assessment and are ready to become warriors." He meowed proudly, his chest puffed out as his eyes glowed. "Orchidfall," Dovepaw tensed beside her. "Is your apprentice worthy of such an honor?"

Viperpaw turned her head and scanned the meeting and spotted the red tabby. Orchidfall cracked a smile and dipped his head. "She is, Beetlestar." He purred.

"Sweetpool," the leader turned his gaze to the she-cat. "Has Sagepaw proven herself to be called a warrior?"

The tortoiseshell she-cat nodded. "She's been ready for moons, Beetlestar." She meowed proudly.

The tortoiseshell leader swung his head around and looked at Shadowstep, who was sitting with Goldenstripe and Cursedblood. "Shadowstep, is Mistpaw capable of being a warrior?"

"Capable and more, Beetlestar." Meowed Shadowstep, her tail twitching impatiently.

Beetlestar's whiskers twitched and raised his face to the sky. "I, Beetlestar, leader of ThunderClan call upon my warrior ancestors to

look down on these three apprentices. They have trained hard to understand and learn the ways of your noble code and I condemn them as a warrior in their turn." He looked at the apprentices and gestured with his tail for them to come forward.

Dovepaw was the first to step forward, her eyes glittering and her head held high. Mistpaw and Sagepaw padded forward eagerly, eyes wide and bright.

"Dovepaw, Mistpaw, Sagepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan even at the cost of your own life?" Beetlestar questioned, his eyes turning serious.

Viperpaw held her breath as Mistpaw and Sagepaw replied and she glanced at Dovepaw, nervous and scared.

"I do, Beetlestar." Dovepaw meowed.

"Then by the power of StarClan, I grant you your warrior names. From this moment on, you three shall be known as Dovebelly, Mistfur, and Sageheart." Beetlestar bowed his head. "StarClan honors your courage and bravery and we welcome you as full warriors of ThunderClan."

"Dovebelly!" Viperpaw yowled, making sure she was the first to call Dovebelly's new name.

"Dovebelly! Mistfur! Sageheart!" Cheered the Clan, much louder than Viperpaw.

As the Clan settled down, Sweetpool bounded up to her daughter. Her eyes glowed with pride and love as she nuzzled Dovebelly. "I'm so proud of you!" She purred and licked her cheek.

"Mother!" Dovebelly hardly bit back the purr as her mother showed her affection. Viperpaw backed away as her former denmate was flooded by her Clan, pelt prickling.

"There's another ceremony I must perform," Beetlestar went on and flicked his tail for the Clan to calm down. "There are three kits who have reached the age of three moons and are ready to be apprenticed." He looked over his shoulder and Viperpaw spotted the

three kits sitting outside the nursery. "Cloudkit, Amberkit, Thunderkit, please come forward."

Viperpaw watched as the three kits took five steps toward their Clan leader. She felt a pang of fear as she looked at Amberkit, seeing the white patches of her pelt glisten with scarlet blood. The apprentice stared in shock as the river of red ran down her ginger and white pelt and stained her fur and the grass.

The rivulet oozed from a gash on her shoulder, a cut above her right eye, her neck, chest, and a deep slash on her flank. Viperpaw stared unblinkingly at the young kit, startled as her eyes went from hazel to amber then back again. She blinked and the pool of blood was gone.

"Thunderpaw, your mentor will be Darkfang. She is a great warrior and a strong cat and I know she will guide your paws to walk the path of a warrior." Beetlestar concluded and nodded to his deputy. "Meeting dismissed."

Viperpaw blinked, a bit disappointed that she missed the ceremony but more nervous about Amberpaw's future. *Did I imagine the blood and wounds on her coat?* She blinked and felt eyes burning into her back. Craning her neck, she saw Dustynose staring at her.

The medicine cat's eyes shone with knowing and it chilled Viperpaw to the bone. When the healer blinked her light green eyes at her, Viperpaw realized that she had seen the blood and wounds on Amberpaw as well. With a final tiny nod, Dustynose rose to her paws and disappeared into her den, her tail flicking behind her as the darkness swallowed her.

Chapter Eleven

Viperpaw jumped in her nest as a horrible screech made her wake from her dreamless sleep. Around her in the apprentice's den, the three new apprentices had their tails bushed out in fear. Only Amberpaw seemed mildly interested. Viperpaw sprang to her paws and ran out of the den, making note that it was the middle of the night.

"What in the name of StarClan is going on?" Asked Cloudpaw as she shot to Viperpaw's side. Her eyes, wide and scared, glowed in the midnight gloom.

"Applefrost is having her kits!" Called Echopaw as she bounded by and disappeared into the nursery.

"What?" Viperpaw gasped and looked over to see her father pacing the camp, his orange eyes round with worry and fear. Her mother only announced her expected litter about a moon ago and already she was kitting?

"Will the kits be okay?" Questioned Cloudpaw as she stared at where Echopaw had gone.

"I-I don't know," Viperpaw admitted and spotted Dovebelly talking with Mistfur and Sageheart. She felt a pang of loneliness hit her as she watched her former denmates laugh and playfully push one another. Jealousy boiled in her belly and she found herself unsheathing her claws. *I thought* I *was her friend.* She thought and forced herself to look away.

"A she-cat!" Dustynose's delighted cry made Viperpaw prick her ears. "You're doing great, Applefrost."

Cloudpaw sat down, a whisker shorter than Viperpaw. "I wonder what the kits will look like," she meowed, her voice thoughtful. "Maybe they'll look like Poppypaw."

Viperpaw winced at the mention of her sister and couldn't reply as she looked at the nursery. Would any of the kits look like their older sister? Would Scarredbelly accept his new kits even though he and Applefrost weren't mates? Did he *want* the kits?

Several cries from the nursery and murmurs of encouragement made Viperpaw wince and she flicked her tail anxiously. She screwed her eyes shut and her mind filled with the image of Amberpaw, her claws unsheathed and perched on a stone. Blood gushed around her as cats shrieked in pain and fury while she watched in dark pride.

Viperpaw shook her head and opened her eyes, feeling sick to her stomach with fear and mild curiosity. Was her mother going to be alright? What about the kits? Would they survive the kitting they were never supposed to be part of?

"That's it, Applefrost." Purred Dustynose and Viperpaw jumped. "You have six beautiful...healthy kits." There was a hint of concern in her voice and it made the fur along Viperpaw's spine lift.

Not waiting any longer, she shouldered her way into the nursery as Dustynose and Echopaw left. She saw the red-orange tabby pelt of her mother and six bundles of fur cuddled at the curve of her belly. Viperpaw felt her heart warm at the sight of her little siblings and she crouched down, admiring the six lumps.

"Aren't they amazing?" Applefrost murmured weakly, lying on her side with her head on the ground. She was panting hard and Viperpaw felt alarm pierce through her.

"They're adorable," purred Dawnslash as her kits slept at her belly. Her eyes were troubled as she looked at one kit in particular: a flame-colored tabby tom. He was smaller than his littermates and he seemed off-set.

Viperpaw looked at her little brother in confusion and padded around to Applefrost's hindquarters and got a better look at him. She gasped in shock. "Hi-his leg!" She cried and pointed with a claw at the kit's missing leg.

Applefrost hissed and flicked her tail over Viperpaw's mouth, silencing her. "Be quiet!" She growled and curled closer around her kits, her eyes sparkling with rage. "These kits are a blessing from StarClan and no kit of mine will be judged by their appearance!"

Hot rage flooded through Viperpaw and she was unable to hold back her retort. "What a good job you did with me!" She saw Dawnslash gape at her in shock and Applefrost flinched. "Since I opened my eyes, every cat has judged me for my pelt." She added, lowering her voice to not disturb the kits. "Your kits look fine, and I was just startled." Without another look at the kits or her mother, she stalked out of the nursery and padded into the clearing.

The night air was crisp and cool, making her feel more comfortable as she watched her Clanmates return to their nests. She let out a sigh and dragged her paws toward the apprentice's den.

"Viperpaw, wait!" Dovebelly's call made her stop and look over her shoulder to see the new warrior trotting to catch up. Her eyes glowed as she brushed against the apprentice. "Where are you heading?"

"Back to my nest," Viperpaw replied, her voice dry. "I was hoping to catch some more sleep."

Dovebelly's whiskers twitched in amusement. "Care for one more?" She asked, her eyes glinting.

Viperpaw felt her pelt start to burn as she flattened her ears. She found it hard to respond as Dovebelly curled her tail above her back. "S-sure."

The new warrior smirked and brushed passed her, sending sparks through her body as she padded toward the apprentice den. Viperpaw smiled and eagerly followed.

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"Are you sure you can start training again?" Cursedblood asked, his eyes serious and concerned as he looked at his apprentice. The sun glowed above their heads as the leaf-fall breeze ruffled their fur.

With the colder seasons around the corner, Darkfang was sending out more and more hunting patrols. Even Dustynose and Echopaw were more often than not outside the camp collecting herbs. "I don't want your wounds to bother you."

Viperpaw felt her paws itch to leave the camp and do something other than stay in the camp. "I'm perfectly fine, Cursedblood." She meowed, impatience creeping into her mew. "Dustynose said I can do my apprentice chores and leave camp."

"But she didn't say you could train," meowed Darkfang as she padded up, Thunderpaw at her side. "We need you to be healthy and fully healed."

"I'm *fine*," Viperpaw insisted, lashing her tail in annoyance. She hated that the Clan treated her like a kit. "Can we go now?"

Cursedblood sighed and nodded, making her spirits lift. "We'll start with battle training then we'll hunt." He said and looked at Darkfang. "Are Amberpaw and Scarredbelly meeting us at the mossy clearing?" He asked.

The Clan's deputy nodded, her ear twitching. "Yes, but we should go now so we do not keep them waiting." With a whisk of her tail, Darkfang padded through the thorn tunnel, Cursedblood on her heels.

Viperpaw followed as Thunderpaw brought up the rear. A thorn tore her right ear tip and she hissed as blood flicked against her muzzle. The iron-tinged flavor of blood was bitter and sweet at the same time, surprised the apprentice.

Darkfang led the way through the maze of trees while Thunderpaw gawked at how many of the tall oaks there was. The new apprentice was bursting with questions that made Viperpaw's ears hurt.

"How many trees are in the forest?" The creamy white tom asked, his light green eyes taking in the land hungrily.

"No cat is sure," Darkfang responded without looking at her apprentice. Viperpaw noticed her whiskers twitching. "If you want

to count them all, be my guest."

"Did Applefrost name her new kits yet?" Thunderpaw flicked his eyes to Viperpaw, who looked away quickly.

"Yes, she did." Cursedblood purred and flicked his tail. "The gray-and-white she-kit is Morningkit, the red tabby she-kit with white paws is Dreamkit, the dilute calico tabby tom is Deerkit, the dusty orange tabby tom with Brackenkit, the mottled brown and gray tabby tom is Cedarkit, and the bright orange tabby tom is Oddkit."

"Oddkit?" Echoed Thunderpaw, making a face. "Why Oddkit?"

Viperpaw lashed her tail once, her neck fur starting to rise and bristle. "Because he was born with three legs, not four." She growled angrily, furious with her mother naming the innocent kit such a cruel name.

"But that's horrible!" Cried the apprentice, his eyes wide. "Applefrost must be mad to name her kit that."

"Let's not judge Applefrost's decision to name her kit," said Darkfang, her voice sharp. "We are blessed with so many kits."

Cursedblood murmured in agreement and twitched his tail. He lifted his nose to the air and sniffed a few times. "Wait," he ordered and Viperpaw stopped at his side, confused.

"What do you smell, Cursedblood?" Darkfang asked, turning around to look at the warrior.

"I smell...ShadowClan warriors." He growled and Viperpaw saw his claws unsheathe. "They're not far from here and I smell fresh blood."

Darkfang lashed her tail, eyes sparkling with anger. "First they cross the border, and then they catch our prey." She hissed and shook her head, looking at Thunderpaw. "Thunderpaw, go back to camp for backup while we confront the ShadowClan warriors." She ordered.

Thunderpaw looked defiant. "But I can fight!" He protested.

Cursedblood looked at Thunderpaw, his eyes serious. "You are fresh out of the nursery with zero training whatsoever," he retorted. "Do what you're told."

Darkfang flicked her ear and Thunderpaw reluctantly dashed off. "Come on," she growled and Viperpaw followed the deputy with Cursedblood on her tail. They slid through a clump of ferns and Viperpaw heard voices.

"How far does Blizzardstar want us to go?" Asked a silver and white tabby, a she-cat.

"As far as we can until we get caught," answered a stocky blue-gray she-cat. "Make sure the prey is in clear view when we are caught."

"They're looking for a fight," Viperpaw whispered to Darkfang and looked at the deputy. Her eyes were stormy as she drew back her ears. "What do we do?"

"There's five of them," the dark tabby she-cat hissed and flicked her tail. "We can drive them back if we surround them. Cursedblood, take the right flank and I'll come from the front." She looked at Viperpaw. "You'll take the left flank. Take on the smallest cat and only fight when you're attacked."

Viperpaw nodded and braced herself, claws unsheathing. "Will we confront them?"

Darkfang nodded and, without another word, pushed through the greenery. "What are you doing here?" She demanded, glaring at the five warriors.

Viperpaw slipped to the left, eyes pinning a small smoky-gray tom with a light front paw. She narrowed her eyes, making the cat wince but glare back.

"We're just getting our tour," sneered the blue-gray she-cat, her tail lashing behind her as she glared at Darkfang. Her orange eyes slid to Viperpaw and a smirk grew on her face. "Bringing your smallest warriors to a fight, Darkfang?"

Darkfang drew her ears back, her eyes narrowing into slits.

"Trespassing, Mistypelt?" She countered and unsheathed her tail.

"We're just doing what our leader told us," snapped the silver-and-white tabby she-cat.

"And that means hunting on another Clan's land, Ivyfur?" Demanded Cursedblood, his eyes sharp.

"Enough!" Hissed a brown tabby tom with yellow-amber eyes. His eyes burned into Darkfang, but the deputy didn't back down. "We aren't leaving without our prey, Darkfang." He growled, his tail lashing.

"We might leave at all, in fact." Added a white tom with black patches. "Maybe we want to stay a little while."

Darkfang let out a snarl and sprang at Mistypelt, tackling her to the ground. Battle broke out and Viperpaw hurled herself at the smoky-gray tom, slashing his ears.

The tom reared on his hind legs, blood trickling from his ear as he slammed his front paws on the back of her neck, shoving her to the ground. "You should have never come here!" He snarled, but his voice was fearful and worried.

"This is our territory, not ShadowClan's!" Viperpaw retorted but found herself not retaliating.

"We don't want your land," hissed the tom as he sheathed his claws, pinning her to the ground with pleading eyes. "You sent a cat for backup, but my Clanmates only want blood."

"Clearly," Viperpaw spat in his face.

The tom didn't seem fazed. "Blizzardstar's gone mad out of her mind, ordering us to train with our claws unsheathed and to fight our rivals with the intent to kill." His eyes were pleading. "Please, ThunderClan cat, retreat and come to ShadowClan and rid my Clan of Blizzardstar."

Viperpaw narrowed her eyes. "And if we don't?" She challenged.

"Your Clan will crumble because Blizzardstar's warriors will kill them," he replied and released Viperpaw, watching as she got to her paws. "Please, ThunderClan cat, help me and save my Clan."

Before Viperpaw could reply, a shriek split the air and she turned to see Mistypelt slashing open Darkfang's throat with her claws. Viperpaw watched in sick horror as the respected deputy fell to the ground, her green eyes wide and glazed as blood pooled around her.

Chapter Twelve

Viperpaw stared at the body of the dead deputy as rage filled her from ears to tail tip. She looked at Mistypelt, who was grinning down at the deed she had done. Without hesitation, she cleared the distance in three bounds and lunged for the ShadowClan warrior.

"Murderer!" She screeched, tearing into the warrior's pelt, drawing blood. "You killed her!"

"Good riddance!" Mistypelt sank her teeth into Viperpaw's shoulder and tossed her to the ground, placing a hefty paw on the apprentice's chest to hold her down. "Darkfang deserved to die!"

Thunderpaw, I'm so sorry. She thought as she clawed desperately at the she-cat's chest. *Get here and I'll tear this piece of fox-dung to shreds.*

"Viperpaw!" There was a yowl and Viperpaw twisted underneath Mistypelt to see her Clanmates burst from the forest and overwhelm the ShadowClan warriors.

Beetlestar saw the lifeless body of his deputy and narrowed his eyes. He leaped at Mistypelt, allowing Viperpaw to scramble to her paws and aid the Clan leader. He didn't appear to need any help as he raked his claws down the she-cat's face.

"Argh!" Mistypelt stumbled back, blood dripping from her right eye. She glared at the ThunderClan leader, her left eye blazing with hatred and cold triumph. "I'll flay you alive, just like Darkfang!"

Beetlestar reared on his hind legs and Viperpaw shot forward, ramming her shoulder into the side of Mistypelt, knocking her off-balance. Her Clan leader got the message and slithered toward the she-cat, slashing his claws down her belly.

Mistypelt roared in pain and fury as she toppled to the side. "You ThunderClan scum will pay!" She shrieked and got to her paws,

blood running down her face and belly. Without warning, she lunged for Viperpaw and sank her teeth into her scruff. Flinging a paw around her shoulder, Mistypelt faced Beetlestar, sneering. "One more step and I'll rip out her throat."

Beetlestar hesitated, looking at Viperpaw. He blinked at her, but the apprentice gave him a tiny nod. He seemed to understand as he sheathed his claws and forced his fur to lie flat.

"Good choice, Beetlestar." Purred Mistypelt, her left eye twinkling with triumph. "Call off your warriors and we'll leave in peace."

Viperpaw unsheathed her claws and sank her teeth into her captor's leg. Mistypelt yowled in anger and Viperpaw whirled around, slashing her chest before springing away.

Mistypelt sank to the ground, coughing and wheezing as she spat out blood. Her belly and chest gushed out blood, making it pool around her just like Darkfang. Her left eye looked up at them, pained and angry. "Y-you little brat," she whispered before the light died from her eye and she fell limp.

Viperpaw looked up at Beetlestar, who was shaking his head and sighing. "Beetlestar?" She meowed, nudging her leader with her shoulder.

"A life for a life," he meowed, his voice strained as he looked around at the battlefield. The ThunderClan cats were winning and most of the ShadowClan cats had retreated. *Including that tom who warned me.* Viperpaw added silently. "That's the price Mistypelt paid for slaying Darkfang."

Viperpaw didn't reply as she looked at the limp form of the ThunderClan deputy. She was a great deputy, if not a bit strict at times. Thunderpaw had only had her as his mentor for a day and he already needed a replacement.

"ShadowClan warriors, retreat!" Yowled Ivyfur as she turned tail and raced away, the rest of her patrol on her tail.

"We won!" Declared Spottedshine, his tail high. He was bleeding from a torn ear tip and his fur was missing clumps but his eyes shone brightly.

Sweetpool padded up to Darkfang's body, her eyes shadowed as she nosed underneath the she-cat and hauled her onto her shoulders. "We won, but at the cost of a friend." She meowed.

Spottedshine seemed confused until his eyes rested on Darkfang and his ears drew back, eyes widening. "Who-who killed her?" He whispered, looking at Beetlestar and Viperpaw.

Beetlestar nodded to Mistypelt's body, only a few tail-lengths away from where he and Viperpaw stood. "She died trying to kill Viperpaw," was all he said, not at all mentioning that Viperpaw was the one who killed the she-cat.

Venombranch limped up to her leader, her eyes shining with pain. "Thunderpaw warned us of five ShadowClan warriors," she rasped. "But I counted seven or eight."

Viperpaw stiffened and flicked her tail. "Darkfang said it was five," she meowed, her voice stiff. "Maybe she miscounted."

Beetlestar let out a sigh and shook his head sadly. "They're gone now, and Darkfang is dead." He looked at the limp body of Darkfang splayed across Sweetpool's shoulders. "We'd better go back to camp and tell the Clan the news."

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Viperpaw sighed as she watched Dustynose and Echopaw carry flowers of lavender and mint toward Darkfang's limp form in the center of the clearing. The returning patrol had reached the camp as dusk began to set in the forest, sending a frosty chill through the apprentice's body.

Darkfang's kits, Cursedblood, Venombranch, and Dawnslash were watching on in grief as the medicine cats as they nosed their mother into a ball as though she were sleeping. Thunderpaw was crouched among them, his eyes dull and clouded. Though only Darkfang's

apprentice for a short while, he valued her as deputy and Viperpaw felt a pang of sadness for her denmate.

Paws sounded to her right as Dovebelly sat next to Viperpaw. "Scarredbelly is in shock," she meowed softly, her breath ruffling Viperpaw's ear fur. "He's ranting about how he'll rip the out the throat of who killed Darkfang."

Viperpaw sighed and looked at Dovebelly, her heart heavy. She hadn't told any cat about who killed Mistypelt, only that the she-cat had died in the heat of battle. *I've never felt this bad since Applefrost killed Poppypaw.* Her heart twisted at the thought of her sister. *At least Darkfang can mentor Poppypaw in StarClan.*

"You know she liked you an awful lot," meowed the warrior as she turned her gaze back to the clearing. Viperpaw let out a humorless laugh but looked at the she-cat. "She spoke highly of you even though you weren't her apprentice."

Viperpaw didn't respond as Beetlestar climbed to the top of the Highledge and sat at the peak. For a moment, their eyes met and the apprentice tensed.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting!" Beetlestar called, his eyes dark and voice thick with sadness. As the Clan began to settle in their spots, the leader went on. "We have lost a noble cat in Darkfang, not just as a deputy, but as a mother. May StarClan light her path always."

The Clan murmured in agreement and Darkfang's kits dropped their heads in grief. Dawnslash was pressed against Cursedblood, who wrapped a paw around his sisters and whispered to them.

"Alas, with a heavy heart, I must appoint a new deputy in her place." Beetlestar turned his face to the sky as the sun began to set. "I say these words before the body of Darkfang, so her spirit may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy will be Spottedshine."

Viperpaw was surprised at his choice, but Spottedshine was a popular choice, after all. And, she couldn't forget, was one of the

remaining senior warriors. She approved that Beetlestar chose the tom, however, he was a bit looser with the apprentices than Darkfang was.

The white speckled tom rose to his paws and padded forward, his eyes grateful but shadowed. "I'm honored by your choice, Beetlestar. I will never be half the deputy Darkfang was, nor half the friend. But I will try my very best."

"Spottedshine!" Called Wildrapid, quickly joined in by Orchidfall.

"Spottedshine!" Hollered Shadowstep, her eyes glowing in pride for her father.

Scarredbelly raised his voice above the new deputy's kits. "Spottedshine!"

Spottedshine dipped his head, his ears flattened to his head in embarrassment. "Thank you," he mouthed to his friend and kits.

"There is one more ceremony I must perform," Beetlestar flicked his tail for silence. "Thunderpaw is mentorless and I shall appoint him a new mentor." He turned his head and looked at Goldenstripe. "Goldenstripe, you are a strong and skillful warrior and I know you will pass on all you know onto Thunderpaw."

Goldenstripe looked pleased and he shot a playful look at Viperpaw, a twinkle of mischief in his light green eyes. He padded toward Thunderpaw, who didn't so much as look at his new mentor as they touched noses.

"Meeting dismissed," Beetlestar meowed and padded down the Highledge before disappearing into his den.

Viperpaw let out a sigh and looked at Dovebelly, who licked her ear comfortingly. The action sent a spark through her body and she resisted the urge to press against her. Instead, she flinched away and flattened her ears before quickly rushing away toward the apprentice's den.

"Viperpaw, wait for me!" Called Cloudpaw, hurrying after her. Viperpaw slowed down and stood as the fluffy white she-cat with

darker gray patches caught up. "In a hurry, eh?" She teased and nudged Viperpaw playfully.

"Er, yes." She answered awkwardly, her cheeks flushing hot pink. "What do you need, Cloudpaw?"

"Well," the she-cat seemed a bit shy. "You are the senior apprentice and I thought..." Cloudpaw trailed off and Viperpaw twitched her whiskers.

"Cloudpaw," she meowed gently. "I'm only senior apprentice by a moon and a half." Viperpaw smiled softly at Cloudpaw, making the patched apprentice flush.

"W-well I-I thought you could help me with my training," Cloudpaw rushed her sentence and didn't meet Viperpaw eyes.

Viperpaw let out a laugh and it startled Cloudpaw before she sheepishly joined in. When she calmed down, her heart was light and she felt at ease. "Of course I'll help you, Cloudy." She meowed and playfully shoved her shoulder with a paw. "Just let me get some sleep before I co-mentor."

Cloudpaw grinned and bounded into the apprentice's den, Viperpaw following. "You know," the younger apprentice turned her head to look at the older apprentice, flashing a pearly white smirk that made Viperpaw's heart do a flip. "Thunderpaw's got his eyes on you."

Viperpaw stared at Cloudpaw in partial shock and surprise. "What's that supposed to mean?" She asked, her tail flicking.

Cloudpaw laughed and Viperpaw half-smiled. "What I mean is," she took a few steps toward the tabby apprentice. Her fluffy tail flicked under Viperpaw's chin and the apprentice raised an eyebrow. "My brother, the almighty Thunderpaw, likes you." She jabbed a paw at Viperpaw's chest, amusing the apprentice.

Viperpaw smirked and got into Cloudpaw's face, causing the she-cat to flush once more. This time, it was deeper and darker. "Well then it sucks for him," she whispered, her breath ruffling Cloudpaw's face

fur.

"And why is that, senior apprentice Viperpaw?" Cloudpaw asked, her voice softer than a feather and more gentle than a mother cat's touch.

"Because I do not like him like that," Viperpaw replied and brushed passed her, heading for her nest and curling into a ball and closing her eyes.

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"About time you showed up again, little snake," the voice of Rushstar rang through Viperpaw's head.

"What are we going to do today, Rushstar?" Viperpaw asked, rising to her paws and looking at the gray-and-white leader.

Rushstar hummed. "So ambitious, my little Viper," he padded around her and flicked his tail around her neck. "You did great in the battle yesterday."

"You were watching?" Viperpaw felt her heart thumping in her chest, her eyes widening.

Rushstar smirked and nodded. "I also saw your little encounter with Cloudpaw." In one swoop, Viperpaw was thrown to the ground with a paw of unsheathed claws placed on her chest. "You're becoming distracted, little snake." He cooed into her ear, making her shiver.

"I'm just trying to get allies, Rushstar." She whispered, her voice trembling slightly. "I can't live in a Clan if I have no spies."

Rushstar grinned and let her up, sitting down as she got to her feet. "There are some cats, a family, that are in your territory." He meowed, licking a paw and drawing it over one ear. "I have not met them before, but they are starving and they have two kits."

"Same age?" Viperpaw questioned, suddenly interested.

The tom shook his broad head, a scar on his muzzle flashing in the dark gloom. "No, but the mother is nursing a kit. They have no

home and are on the brink of death."

Viperpaw tilted her head to one side. "What do you want me to do?" She asked.

"Bring them into ThunderClan," he answered matter-of-factly. "They will trust you because you brought them into a Clan with food and shelter. They can be of use in the near future."

Viperpaw twitched an ear. "When do you want me back here to train?"

"When Beetlestar accepts them into the Clan, visit and tell me of your progress." He replied and blinked at her. "Don't worry, little snake. You will see me in the waking world soon." His voice was soft with menace, but it comforted Viperpaw. When she didn't do anything, Rushstar raised an eyebrow. "You're bothered." He prompted.

"Applefrost just had another litter of kits," she drew a circle with her paw, uncomfortable. "One of the kits was born with three legs and she named the kit Oddkit."

Rushstar blinked in surprise, though it was mild. "How is your father taking it?"

"I don't know," she admitted with a sigh of frustration. "Scarredbelly doesn't visit the kits or me."

"Because of Poppypaw's death." The gray-and-white tom rose to his paws and rested his tail across her shoulders. "Do not fret, little snake, your father will be punished by us."

"Your daughter was made a warrior," Viperpaw meowed, startling the leader. He looked at her in surprise as she went on. "Dovebelly is a great warrior."

Rushstar purred loudly, pride colored his purr instead of the menace she grew used to. "I knew she would be a great warrior," he meowed and flicked his ear. "How is Sweetpool?"

Viperpaw blinked at him in shock. *So he does care about his family,* she thought. *He does have a heart.* "Sweetpool seems to be having a great time now that Dovebelly is a warrior." She replied.

"That's great news, Viperpaw." Rumbled the tom, a purr in his throat. "You'd better get some sleep, you have a long day ahead of you." Without warning, Viperpaw was plunged into darkness.

Chapter Thirteen

"Hey, Viperpaw!" Called Thunderpaw, trotting up to her with a doofy grin on his face. It was sunhigh, and Cursedblood had given her a day off and relax.

"Good afternoon, Thunderpaw." She purred, sitting up and looking at the tom. "What do you need?"

"Spottedshine wants you to go on a solo hunt," he meowed and twitched his whiskers. "With leafbare on the way, he says he wants the apprentices to have as much practice with hunting in the forest alone as possible."

Viperpaw rose to her paws and nodded. "Thanks for the message, Thunderpaw. I'll head out right now." She meowed and brushed against the tom before heading for the thorn tunnel.

Once she was outside the camp, Rushstar's words rang out in her ears. *There are some cats, a family, that are in your territory.* The tom had said. *I have not met them before, but they are starving and they have two kits.* Viperpaw let out a sigh and began to sniff the air, catching the scent of a mouse.

Crouching down, she followed the tantalizing smell around a holly bush and in a clump of ferns. There, nibbling on a seed, was a small mouse. Her mouth began to water as she tensed her muscles and sprang, taking the puny creature by surprise before delivering a killing bite to the neck.

She licked her lips, tasting the warm blood of her catch before picking it up and carrying it to the base of an oak tree. It was a small catch, not nearly enough to feed some of her Clanmates, but it was a good start. After burying her mouse, she set off once more and tasted the air. Almost instantly, she smelled a vole and she dropped into a hunting crouch once more.

As she tracked the rodent's scent, she caught a whiff of a cat. She

stiffened but focused on catching her prey before she investigating. Spotting the vole, she quickly pounced and killed it. Raising her head, she tasted the air and quickly caught the scent of loner mixed with the smell of milk.

They're here, just like Rushstar said. Viperpaw buried her prey where she killed it and leaped out of the ferns. She scanned the forest, searching for the cats Rushstar talked about. *I don't even know what these cats look like.* She thought, snorting as she relaxed and tried to continue with her hunt.

"Where are we going, Amari?" Viperpaw froze, her heart stopping as the voice of a tom echoed off the trees. "We've been walking for moons."

Viperpaw dove into a clump of bracken, not making a sound even as a thorn nearly poked her eye. She spotted five figures, differing in size and pelt colors, padding toward her. The two toms seemed to be kin, brothers at least. The she-cat most likely was a mate or friend and the other she-cat was probably the first's daughter. There was a squeak and Viperpaw realized the tiny cry was a kit.

"Be patient, Amra," meowed Amari, his voice strained and dry from lack of water. "I told you, I had a dream of a cat that would lead us to food and shelter."

"Allie needs food or she won't last the cold season," Amra argued, standing in front of Amari. Viperpaw saw his ribs jutting out of his thin pelt and she winced. "Our paw pads are cracked and bleeding, just like yours. We should have never left the cave."

The older she-cat stepped in between the two toms, her face twisted in pain. She appeared to be limping and Viperpaw smelled a tang of blood. "We would've died if we didn't leave, Amra." She rasped. Her eyes were bloodshot and her claws were dull and some were broken. "We need to find the cat Amari dreamed about if we are to survive."

"How long will that be, Mother?" Asked the younger brown she-cat. She too was only skin and bone but she held a spark in her eyes,

unlike the others.

"I do not know, Armani." The older she-cat admitted. "But I trust that your father will find them soon."

Amra sighed and twitched his tail tip. "Xena, Allie cannot walk any farther." He raised his head and sniffed the air. "If we are to survive, we must find the cat soon."

"We will," Amari rested his tail across Amra's shoulders, his eyes gentle but weary. His gaze shifted until it rested on the bracken Viperpaw was hiding in. "In fact, she's here now."

Xena frowned and followed his gaze, gasping when she saw Viperpaw. Her tail curled around the small shape of a brown tabby she-kit, who was trembling and painfully thin.

Amra whirled around and bared his teeth, eyes lighting with anger. "Come out, she-cat!" He barked. "I can smell your scent!"

Viperpaw hesitated and unsheathed her claws before climbing out of the bracken. Amari looked relieved to see her, despite the others being wary and scared.

"Who are you?" Armani demanded, though her voice faltered at the sight of the small amount of blood on her muzzle. "Y-you made a catch?" She whispered, looking around.

"Y-yes," Viperpaw meowed, her voice shaking. "You're starving, aren't you?" Realizing it was a stupid question, she quickly added. "D-do you want my prey? I don't want that kitten to get ill."

Amari dipped his head, the idea of a meal seeming to brighten his eyes. "Yes please, young cat." His voice was pleading. "If it's no trouble for you."

Viperpaw quickly shook her head. "Of course not," she assured him. "You and your family need it more than I do." Without another word, she turned around and headed back for her catches.

Her paws tingled with excitement as she dug up her vole. *I found them, Rushstar.* She thought, picking up her prey and heading for

the tree where she buried her mouse. *Just like you said.* When she got the mouse, she headed back toward the loners, a spring in her step.

"I've got your prey," Viperpaw meowed, her voice muffled by the fur as she padded back to the loners. She walked toward Xena and placed the vole at her paws. Turning toward the two toms, she set the mouse at their paws. "It's not much, but I managed to catch it myself."

"It will do for now, thank you." Xena nudged the vole toward her two daughters, watching as they eagerly dug in. Turning back to Viperpaw, she smiled. "What's your name?"

Viperpaw hesitated and twitched her ear. "I'm Viperpaw," she replied and looked at Amra and Amari. "I had a dream about you and your family. My uncle told me to bring you to my home."

Amra lifted his head sharply, startling Viperpaw at the ferocity in the starving tom's green eyes. "Your home?" He challenged.

Viperpaw quickly nodded. "I live in a Clan, we hunt our prey, make dens, and we have enough space for you and your family." She looked to Xena as she licked her lips. "Would you like me to show you to the lake?"

"Water?" Allie's head shot up from the vole, her tiny muzzle painted with blood. "There's water here?"

Viperpaw couldn't help but smile and nod. "So much water, you could drink until you're old." She purred.

"Mama!" Allie looked at Xena, who was laughing. "Could we go with her? I'm so thirsty, I could drink an entire river!"

Amari cleared his throat and Viperpaw turned to the tom. "Would you mind showing us the lake, Viper?" He croaked. "We haven't been able to drink fresh water in a moon."

Viperpaw dipped her head and nodded. "Of course, Amari." She meowed and twitched her ear. "Follow me." Padding by the two

toms, she waited as Xena hurried Allie after her.

She took the short way to the lake, which didn't take too long. After a few heartbeats of walking, she heard the water lapping at the shore and the lake came into view.

Armani gasped and Allie squealed in delight before racing ahead toward the water, her older sister on her heels. "Race you to the water!" Armani called.

Xena laughed and charged after her kits, followed by Amra. Viperpaw purred and realized Amari hadn't gone with them. Turning her head, she saw the older tom looking at her with interest.

"There's enough water for everyone," she meowed, jerking her head to where the others were lapping eagerly at the cold surface.

"I know," Amari padded to her side, his eyes reflecting the sun. "I'm curious about you, Viperpaw." He meowed, a small smile creeping onto his face as he watched Allie leap onto Amra's tail. He looked at her, his eyes shining. "I know you mean well, but I'm confused."

"So am I," she admitted and twitched her tail. "Would you like to see my Clan? I'm sure they'd like you."

Amari stared at her and purred. "If it means no harm to you and your Clan, then yes." He gave her a gentle lick on the head and she smiled.

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"Who are they?"

"They smell funny..."

"Beetlestar can't let them stay here!"

Viperpaw flattened her ears and looked up at her leader, who was perched on the Highledge, staring at the loners. She looked behind her where Xena was baring her teeth at the cats who looked at her and her kits.

"Don't worry," Viperpaw whispered, trying to calm the protective mother down. "They don't know you. When they do, they'll be much better."

"Viperpaw," Beetlestar's voice quieted the Clan's muttering as he took in the situation. "Who are these cats?"

Viperpaw took a breath before speaking. "These cats are loners that I found while hunting in the forest." She meowed, her voice loud and not giving away how much she was trembling. "They are starving so I gave them the prey I had managed to catch."

"Traitor!" Shouted the voice of Sageheart, who glared daggers at the newcomers.

"That prey was for the queens and elders!" Added Mistfur, who bared her teeth.

"Please, calm down!" Viperpaw pleaded, looking up at Beetlestar. "Beetlestar, these cats have no home and need us! Besides, how could we turn down the idea of having new warriors?"

Beetlestar looked over at his Clan before resting his dull yellow eyes on the loners. "I, Beetlestar, leader of ThunderClan hereby welcome these five cats into my Clan. These cats are one of us are if they are treated otherwise, those who mistreat them will answer to me."

Viperpaw grinned and looked at Amari, whose eyes were glowing as he gazed at her. "Welcome to ThunderClan, Amari." She murmured and looked at the rest of the newcomers. *Welcome to ThunderClan.*

Chapter Fourteen

"That should do it, Amra." Viperpaw meowed, weaving the final bramble tendril into place and finishing it off by adding some moss to keep out the wind and weather. She turned around and padded around the new den. "How's that, Xena?"

"Perfect." The queen purred and shifted in her nest. "Thank you, Viperpaw."

"Of course," the apprentice purred and sat down. A few days had gone by since the loners had been welcomed into the Clan and it was hard for the Clan to adjust to the five new mouths to feed.

Since Viperpaw gave the prey she'd caught to the newcomers instead of bringing it back to the camp, Beetlestar had ordered her to help make a new den for Xena. Since none of the other queens wanted their kits to share a den with the 'flea-bitten outsiders', Viperpaw helped Amra with the new den.

She loved spending time with her new Clanmates. Playing with Allie was a bunch of fun, and Xena said they owed her an unpayable debt for bringing them into the Clan. Viperpaw adored the young kit, despite the family refusing to take Clan names.

"We like our names," Amari had explained when Viperpaw had asked. "Changing them now would be pointless since we've had them during our journey here."

Viperpaw understood. She liked her name as well, and changing it would've been strange and would feel odd on her tongue. Nonetheless, she loved the new cats and she spent every free moment with them.

"Hey, Viperpaw?" Armari called, trotting up toward them as her new mentor, Badgerstorm, padded away.

Armari was older than her by about four moons but had to be made

an apprentice so she could learn the ways of a Clan cat. She got Badgerstorm as her mentor and the pair turned out to be great with each other.

"What's up?" Viperpaw faced her friend. The sight of her shimmering eyes told her that the brown she-cat had good news.

"Dawnslash let me play with her kits!" Armani bounced on her paws like a kit, her eyes bright.

Viperpaw purred. "That's great, Armani!" She nodded and flicked her tail. "Dawnslash must trust you a lot to let you play with her kits."

Armani shrugged and twitched her ear. "I guess," she looked at Viperpaw. "By the way, Cursedblood is looking for you."

"What does he want?"

Armani gave a big shrug. "I dunno, but he sounded angry." She meowed and padded by into the new den.

Viperpaw felt a surge of uncertainty wash over her as she made her way across the camp toward the warrior's den. *What does Cursedblood want?* Poking her head into the den, she scanned the nests.

"Looking for Cursedblood?" Meowed the voice of Thrushpool as she prodded the apprentice with a paw.

Viperpaw turned and blinked at the she-cat. "Do you know where he is?" She asked.

Thrushpool flicked her ear to where a group of cats were lashing their tails and hissing at the camp's entrance. She saw her father and Amberpaw among them, along with Cursedblood. Meowing a thank you to Thrushpool, she hurried to get to her mentor.

"What do you need, Cursedblood?" She meowed, seeing the furious look on her mentor's face.

"We're going to invade ShadowClan's camp," he growled, his tail

lashing. "They've pushed the border too many times and Beetlestar wants us on the patrol."

Viperpaw stared at her mentor. "Why me?" She asked a bit stunned that Beetlestar would want *her* on the patrol. "I've barely had any battle training."

"You did good in the fight with ShadowClan at the border," he reminded her. "Beetlestar says you don't need any more battle training." Cursedblood paused. "He also says if you do even better, you'll be made a warrior when we return."

***

Beetlestar led the way to the ShadowClan border with the rest of the patrol on his heels. Viperpaw's paws tingled at the thought of being made a warrior, but she made sure she looked composed. *I don't want to get my hopes up.*

The patrol consisted of her, Cursedblood, Scarredbelly, Amberpaw, Sweetpool, Shadowstep, Goldenstripe, Sageheart, Mistfur, Venombranch, Orchidfall, Wildrapid, and Spottedshine. The rest of the cats who were left behind were tasked with protecting the camp.

As they crossed the border, Viperpaw felt unease settle into her belly. The thought of invading the ShadowClan camp sounded absurd, but she followed her leader like a loyal warrior.

Beetlestar wove through trees and around bushes that reeked of ShadowClan warriors. Eventually, they found themselves facing a large line of trees protecting a bramble wall.

Sageheart and Sweetpool surged forward and locked into battle with the two guards defending the camp and Beetlestar led the charge into the camp.

Viperpaw heard many yowls, but she caught the eye of the cat she'd spoken to at the last battle. The smoky-gray tom bounded toward her, but his claws were unsheathed and he sprang at her.

She braced herself for the tom's weight as he crashed into her. Her

claws unsheathed and she raised a paw to strike her opponent's face. When her claws raked his muzzle, Viperpaw ducked and clawed his chest.

"You didn't prevent this, did you?" He hissed, shoving her back and cuffing her ear with a hefty paw. Her head began to spin and, while she was dazed, the tom slashed her face.

"How could I?" She spat out the blood that crept its way into her mouth. Raising her head, Viperpaw glared at the tom. "A warrior is always loyal to their leader." Rearing on her hind legs, she swiped at his cheek.

The tom ducked and aimed a blow at her shoulder, knocking her to the side and shaking his head as she recovered her balance. "Blizzardstar's crazier than she's ever been since Mistypelt died."

Viperpaw cursed as her paws slipped on some mulch and glared at the tom. "It's not my fault she killed Darkfang," she growled and lunged for his chest, slamming her shoulder into his chest and knocking the breath from him. She threw him to the ground and pinned him in place.

"You killed Mistypelt," he rasped, his eyes swimming with emotion. Viperpaw bared her teeth at the tom but found herself sheathing her claws slightly.

"She killed my Clan's deputy," she retorted, but the words rang hollow in her ears. "A life for a life."

Before he could respond, an outraged cry made her look over her shoulder. Her eyes widened as she saw Sageheart crouched over the limp body of Sweetpool.

Forgetting about the tom, Viperpaw hurried toward her Clanmates and crouched next to Sweetpool. The she-cat's neck was littered with bite marks and a very small amount of blood was coming from the wounds.

"I-I shouldn't have left her," Sageheart whispered, burying her nose into the she-cat's fur. Sweetpool's body was still warm, meaning she was killed only seconds ago.

I have to find Beetlestar. Her heart felt like a stone at the thought of telling her leader his daughter was slain in battle. *With zero mercy.* She added silently as she rose to her paws and scanned the battlefield.

When she saw her leader, she felt a stab of pity for the older tom. Beetlestar was raking his claws down the flank of a dark calico tom with dark patches.

Taking a breath, she raced toward her leader and bit on his tail, pulling him away from the calico tom.

Beetlestar let out a roar of anger and whirled around, claws swiping at her ear. When she hissed, the light of battle died in his eyes and he dropped onto all four paws.

"Viperpaw," he growled, tail lashing as she let go. "What are you doing?"

"Beetlestar," Viperpaw took a deep breath and flattened her ears to her head. "Sweetpool is dead."

Beetlestar stared at her as though she'd grown another head. Viperpaw winced at the agony that grew in his dull yellow eyes and forced herself to speak.

"Call off the Clan," she twitched her ear. "We cannot risk any more deaths."

"First Blossomscar," he whispered, starting to tremble. "Then Lightkit and Quickkit, and now Sweetpool." Viperpaw pressed against her leader and guided him toward his daughter's body.

As Beetlestar crouched beside Sweetpool, Viperpaw raised her voice. "ThunderClan, retreat!" She yowled and caught the smoky-gray tom's eye once more before helping Sageheart get Sweetpool onto her shoulders. Once the she-cat and the leader had gone, Viperpaw looked over her shoulder one more time before following.

***

The Clan's reaction to Sweetpool's demise was a disaster to Viperpaw. Amari and his family didn't realize that this was a common occurrence, but she could tell they were surprised when Sageheart explained how Sweetpool had died.

"Sweetpool!" The devastating cry of Dovebelly made pain slice through Viperpaw's heart as the warrior flung herself over the body of her mother and sobbed into her fur.

Viperpaw bit her tongue and looked at Xena, who was shielding Allie from what was happening. She let out a sigh and lowered her head, her tail curling around her front paws.

"Hey," the soft voice of Armani made her twitch her ear but not look up. The brown she-cat sat down next to her, their fur brushing. "Are you okay?"

"Sweetpool died for nothing," she meowed bitterly. "Her father led her to her death." Viperpaw flexed her paws in partial anger and frustration. "She didn't deserve to die."

Armani pressed against her and wrapped a paw around Viperpaw's shoulder. She pulled the younger apprentice close until both paws were around her and she was pressed against her chest. "It'll be okay, Viper." She whispered in her ear. "I swear on my life that it will be okay."

Viperpaw clutched the brown she-cats fur between her paws and, for the first time since her sister's death, started to sob.

Chapter Fifteen

"I, Beetlestar, leader of ThunderClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I condemn her as a warrior in her turn." Beetlestar meowed, his voice loud but hollow. "Viperpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Viperstrike. StarClan honors your ferocity and courage and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." The leader rested his muzzle on Viperstrike's head and she licked his shoulder.

"Viperstrike!" The new warrior heard Armani's excited call before any of her other Clanmates yowl her new name.

"Viperstrike!" Amari joined in, followed by Xena, Allie, Amra, and Dovebelly.

"Viperstrike! Viperstrike! Viperstrike!" The Clan cheered and Viperstrike dipped her head in embarrassment before slinking off to sit with Armani.

"Congratulations!" Purred the brown apprentice, nudging the she-cat with her shoulder.

"Thanks," Viperstrike licked her chest bashfully and looked up at Beetlestar, who looked like was in another world.

"There's one more ceremony I must perform," he meowed and the Clan fell silent. "Echopaw, please come forward."

The medicine cat apprentice padded toward her leader, her head high and her eyes gleaming. Behind her, Dustynose watched her apprentice proudly.

"Dustynose, has Echopaw proven that she can heal her Clanmates and is worthy of becoming the Clan's next medicine cat in your place?" Beetlestar asked, looking at his medicine cat.

Dustynose dipped her head. "She is, Beetlestar." She meowed, her voice strong and proud.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your full medicine cat name." Beetlestar looked at Echopaw, who was holding her breath and holding his gaze steadily. "Echopaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Echolight. StarClan honors your kindness and determination and we welcome you as a full medicine cat of ThunderClan."

"Echolight! Echolight! Echolight!" Cheered the Clan as the newly named she-cat dipped her head.

"Meeting dismissed," Beetlestar meowed and leaped down from the Highledge before disappearing into his den.

Viperstrike watched Echolight grin and bound toward Dustynose, her eyes shining. She chuckled and looked behind her as Amari's scent washed over her.

"Congratulations, Viper." He purred and sat down next to her.

"Thanks, Amari." Viperstrike looked gratefully at the tom. "My sister should have her warrior name right now." She let out a sigh and her good mood dampened slightly.

Amari cast her a surprised look out of the corner of his eye. "You have a sister?" He questioned.

Viperstrike nodded and shifted her paws. "She was killed by Applefrost when she tried to kill me." Her claws unsheathed and dug into the ground.

"Applefrost is the queen in the nursery," Amari looked across the camp to where the red-orange tabby was ducking into the nursery. "I thought queens don't fight."

"They don't," Viperstrike felt bitterness rise in her throat and it slipped into her mew. "But when Poppypaw had me pinned to the ground, my father and Applefrost showed up and Applefrost slaughtered my sister."

Amari rested his black-striped tail across her shoulders, his eyes soft. "I'm sorry for your loss, Viper." He meowed, his voice genuine. "What do you think about going hunting with me? It'll be fun."

Viperstrike looked up at the tom, her eyes wide. "Could we drag Armani along?" She asked.

Amari nodded, his whiskers twitching. "Why don't you go fetch her and we'll head out." He suggested.

Viperstrike purred and bounded toward the apprentice's den, slipping inside without hesitation. She scanned the dark den until a head popped up from one of the nests.

"Viperstrike?" Cloudpaw's green eyes glowed in the dark gloom of the den. "Who are you looking for?"

"Her apprentice mate," sneered Amberpaw's voice and Viperstrike flattened her ears. The ginger and white patched apprentice rose to her paws and padded toward Viperstrike, walking around her and pressing against the warrior. She began to imitate Armani's voice. "Oh, Viperstrike, please cry into my chest fur! Oh, Viperstrike, please save my pathetic family from starvation!"

Viperstrike felt anger and embarrassment prevent her from defending herself and her friends. Her pelt smoldered with shame and she looked at her paws.

Amberpaw stopped at her left flank. "See, she's embarrassed." She shoved the new warrior to the ground. "Does your father know that you seem to chase the tails of she-cats?" She sneered and Viperstrike bared her teeth, but couldn't find the strength nor courage to fight back against her Clanmate. "Pathetic."

"Leave her alone, Amberpaw." The icy voice of Armani made Viperstrike wince as the ginger-and-white apprentice hissed.

"Look who it is," Amberpaw's voice was taunting as Viperstrike got to her paws. She was glaring at the older apprentice with hatred in

her hazel eyes. "The kittypet is here to save the day."

Armani looked at Viperstrike and glared at Amberpaw. Her lip curled to show sharp yellow teeth. "I'm not a kittypet," she growled, her tail lashing behind her.

"Amberpaw," Cloudpaw's whisper was soft as she tried to break the fight apart. "Come on. Spottedshine and Scarredbelly are probably looking for us." She tried to approach her littermate, only for Amberpaw to snarl.

"Back off, Cloudpaw!" She turned on her sister, her eyes slits. "I'm not scared of a kittypet!"

"She's not a kittypet!" Viperstrike retorted, her claws unsheathing as she tried to stop herself from trembling. She wasn't scared of Amberpaw, she just didn't want to look weak in front of both Cloudpaw and Armani. "She's a ThunderClan cat!"

"How do we know she wasn't a soft, spoiled kittypet?" Amberpaw challenged.

"You wouldn't," Armani replied, her voice calm. Viperstrike bit her tongue, trying to hold back her surprise. "But I have never lived with Twolegs and I never will."

Amberpaw looked at the she-cat warily. "I don't trust you," she growled, but she sheathed her claws.

"You don't have to," Armani took a step forward and wrapped her tail around Viperstrike's shoulders. "But I will never leave ThunderClan to become a Twoleg pet." Without letting the she-cat respond, Armani guided Viperstrike out of the den. Once they were outside, she looked at the new warrior, her eyes worried and concerned. "Are you alright? Did she hurt you?"

Viperstrike shook her head, feeling her pelt heat up. "I-I'm fine," she murmured and looked up at her friend, feeling her heart pound in her chest. "Amari and I were wondering if you wanted to go hunting with us."

Armani's water-like blue eyes lit up with excitement. "I'd love to!" She purred and looked around. "I'll let Badgerstorm know I'm leaving the camp and I'll meet you by the thorn tunnel." She rubbed her cheek against Viperstrike's and bounded away happily.

Viperstrike felt dazed as she stumbled toward the thorn tunnel, feeling light and airy as she waited for Armani to return. *What's gotten into me?* She shook herself, but the warm, fuzzy feeling in her belly didn't disappear. *What will Rushstar think?*

Amra's scent wafted over her and she looked up to meet the green-eyed warrior. "Viperstrike," he meowed a stiff greeting.

"Amra," she replied, trying to hide the wariness in her voice. "What's up?"

The large silver tabby tom's body was rigid as he nodded stiffly behind him. Not far away, Thunderpaw was padding with Thrushpool toward them. "Spottedshine wanted me, Thrushpool, and Thunderpaw to patrol the WindClan border."

"Good luck," she meowed, her voice earnest. "WindClan might claw your ears off."

Amra flicked his slim tail dismissively. "I'd like to see them try," he growled, working his paws against the ground. "Shadowstep said they've been testing the border. Same with ShadowClan."

Viperstrike shrugged. "ShadowClan is always causing trouble," she pointed out.

"Viperstrike!" Armani's voice filled her with relief. The brown she-cat bounded toward her and Amra, her eyes excited. "Ready?"

"Of course," Viperstrike responded and dipped her head to Amra, who towered over her and Armani. "See you later, Amra." She purred and followed Armani out of the camp.

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"Nice catch!" Purred Viperstrike as Armani lifted her head. Hanging from her jaws was a squirrel, its fluffy tail hanging limply. The

fuzzy creature had tried to scurry up a tree until Armani hurried after it and caught it just in time.

"Thanks," the brown she-cat panted, padding toward the she-cat with her catch in her jaws. She buried the squirrel and looked at the trees as the leaves started to fall. "Is the prey usually this slow?"

"Not normally," Viperstrike answered. "But leaf-fall is here and the prey stocks up on food before hiding away for leafbare."

"Leafbare? Leaf-fall?" Armani echoed. "What's that?"

Viperstrike stared at the apprentice in shock. "Leaf-fall is when all the trees lose their leaves and the weather gets colder." She explained, a bit surprised. "Leafbare is when all the trees lose all the leaves and it starts to snow."

Armani snorted and looked at the looming oaks. "My family and I call that autumn and winter." She looked at Viperstrike, who was more confused.

"What strange names," she twitched her whiskers. "What other seasons do you know of?" Viperstrike sat down, genuinely curious.

Armani answered without missing a beat. "Spring and summer," she tipped her head to the side. "What about you?"

"Newleaf and greenleaf," Viperstrike replied and blinked. "I'm guessing spring is like newleaf and summer is like greenleaf."

Armani shrugged. "I guess." She looked around and pricked her ears. "I hear a mouse." She whispered.

Viperstrike rose to her paws and crouched down, quietly slipping by Armani and into a bramble bush. She spotted the small gray woodland creature and sprang, killing it with a blow to the neck. Proudly, Viperstrike picked up her catch and padded back to Armani, burying it where she buried her squirrel. "You've got good ears," she teased.

"And you've got good reflexes," Armani countered, her voice playful as she crouched down, her haunches wiggling.

"Reflexes?" Viperstrike scoffed. "What do you-"

Armani sprang at her and tackled the she-cat, rolling with her in a flurry of fur and laughing as she pinned her to the ground. "By the way," she meowed, sounding a bit breathless as she loomed over Viperstrike. "I was being sarcastic."

Viperstrike let out a loud laugh and tried to push the larger she-cat off, but to no avail. "Get off me, you lump of fur!" She purred.

Armani laughed but didn't budge. Instead, she gazed at Viperstrike, her eyes thoughtful. She stared into the she-cat's eyes, seeming to get lost in their orange depths.

"What?" Viperstrike snapped her out of her thoughts, making her jump.

"I don't fully understand you, Clan cat." Armani meowed, her voice teasing but serious. "You intrigue me."

"Intrigue?" Viperstrike questioned. "How?"

"I don't know," Armani confessed and let the warrior up. She sat down and Viperstrike sat next to her. "I feel drawn to you. My whole life, it's just been me, my family, and Amra."

Viperstrike tilted her head to the side. "Isn't Amra part of your family?" Her tail tip twitched in confusion.

"Not by blood," the brown she-cat admitted and didn't meet Viperstrike's eyes. "My father was born an only kit, like me and Allie, but met Amra when he met my mother." She looked up at the sky as the sun began to set across the horizon, turning the sky pink and pale. "When we started traveling, I grew up and my mother had Allie. Amra was happy to have more family, as he never had one. As soon as Allie learned how to walk and start to eat fresh-kill, we set off and after a while, came here."

"That's when I ran into you," Viperstrike concluded, her voice soft and gentle.

Armani nodded and let out a sigh, her shoulder slumped. "My

family is all I've ever known. If any ever happened to them, I-I don't know what I'd do."

"Hey," Viperstrike pressed against her friend, feeling her stiffen before relaxing. "Don't worry about it. I'm here to help. I brought you here." She reminded her softly. "I helped you then, and I'll help you again."

Armani didn't respond as she turned to Viperstrike, her eyes alight with fear and something else. She searched Viperstrike's eyes intensely, but the warrior didn't know what she could be looking for. After a long moment, the brown she-cat spoke, her voice soft and quiet. "Could you tell me about you?" She asked.

Viperstrike was taken aback but nodded. She began to explain how she was born and how Poppykit was demanding and playful. As she told her story, Armani shifted closer to her and laid down. Still speaking, she lied down next to her and felt her heart racing in her chest. As the night went on, she went on explaining about how Applefrost killed her sister, saying she was expecting kits and was awaiting being exiled.

Privately, she wondered what Poppypaw's warrior name would've been had she not been killed. *Poppyheart? Poppyclaw? Poppycloud?* She wanted *some* closure that her sister went to StarClan without getting her warrior name. *The elders say that only warriors and leaders go to StarClan.* Worry settled into her belly like a cloud. *Did Poppypaw not go to StarClan because she was still an apprentice when she died?*

When she finished her story, silence hung in the air and Viperstrike was grateful for it. She didn't what to say to Armani, let alone hear what she had to say. Admittedly, she left out the part where she killed Mistypelt in revenge for the death of Darkfang. *What would she think of me if I told her about Rushstar?* A chill ran down the length of her spine and the fur on her back rose at the thought. *What Rushstar is doing is helping me become a better warrior for my Clan.* She reminded herself sharply, but doubt pricked at her belly.

In the distance, Viperstrike saw green flash in the trees. Her heart skipped a beat as she spotted the dark patched pelt of Cloudpaw in

the bushes. She saw that the apprentice was alone, but didn't want to believe it was her. *I'm sorry, Cloudpaw.* She thought, her heart cracking. *But my heart lies with someone else.*

Chapter Sixteen

Slippaw sighed as he applied more mouse-bile onto Marshflame's back. The tick buried itself deeper into the elder's flesh, but Slippaw pried it loose with a claw and threw it to the ground, crushing it with a paw. In front of him, the brown tabby tom sighed in relief.

"Thank you for that, Slippaw." He purred, rolling his shoulders. "That one was bothering me."

"Of course, Marshflame," Slippaw replied and gathered the mouse-bile and stuck his pink tongue out. "Gross." He muttered and headed out of the den, the disgusting moss dangling from his claw.

The small amount of sunlight from the sky warmed his smoky-gray pelt, letting him know leaf-fall was ending. *Soon, leafbare will come back.* He let out a defeated sigh as he padded toward the dirtplace cave and buried the moss. Walking out, he looked around the camp, spotting his father, Junipertail talking with Ivyfur outside the warrior's den. His mother, Lilymist, was lounging outside the nursery with her new litter bouncing all over the place.

They were born three moons ago and they were prepared to become apprentices. Condorkit, the largest of the litter, was a black tom with gray paws and amber eyes. Frostkit, one of the smaller of the kits, was a gray and silver tabby she-cat with yellow-amber eyes. Peakkit was an average-sized kit, he was a black tom with a white face and orange eyes. Lastly, Amberkit was the second largest kit, she was a smoky-black she-cat with golden-yellow eyes.

The four kits were rambunctious and ambitious to become warriors, saying they'll be better without the training of an apprenticeship. Slippaw sighed and sat down, watching as his Clan did their thing. He couldn't see his mentor, Lightningstreak anywhere, despite Snowfall not sending out any patrols. The tom knew about his grudge against the ThunderClan warrior, Wildrapid the last time they invaded.

Wildrapid had tried to start a fight over his daughter, Cloudkit. Slippaw didn't see why Spotpelt had stolen the kit in the first place, as the ThunderClan cats had taken the kit back the same day. Slippaw assumed the ThunderClan kit was made an apprentice with the name Cloudpaw, but he couldn't be sure. It had been moons since the last Gathering ShadowClan had gone to, and Blizzardstar had announced earlier that they wouldn't go anymore.

As the Clan went on with the day, no cat seemed to notice Slippaw. His heart felt hollow as he sighed, looking at his paws. None of his Clanmates particularly liked him, like normal. Even as a kit, no one paid him any more attention than his more popular siblings.

Silverpaw and Kestrelpaw were better than him in every way. They'd mastered hunting in the first moon of becoming apprentices, later becoming experts in battle after another half-moon. Meanwhile, Slippaw was struggling to pin down his Clanmates during practice. He wasn't the greatest hunter, either. Every couple of days, he'd bring back some frogs or mice. Rarely, he'd bring back a thrush or crow for the fresh-kill pile.

Earlier that day, he'd brought back a blackbird, filled with pride. Upon noticing that no cat paid him any attention with his catch, his pride turned to bitterness and sadness as he dropped his prey off at Rainpelt's den before sulking away to the elder's den. Rainpelt's kits, Willowsun and Paleflower, were the two youngest warriors in ShadowClan. Not only were they the medicine cat's kits, but Marshflame's as well.

Although the medicine cat makes time for her daughters, Marshflame let the Clan raise his kits. He did congratulate them when they became apprentices and then warriors.

Slippaw let out another defeated sigh and rose to his paws, heading for the gorse tunnel that led out of the camp. Once he got into the pine forest, he headed for the carrionplace to meet up with Adderheart. For moons, he'd met up with the warrior from a Clan called DarkClan, led by Rushstar. He'd never bring the leader along with his meetings, but Slippaw had dreamt of the gray-and-white patched DarkClan leader. Along with the chilling news that the ThunderClan warrior Viperstrike was training with him. Slippaw

had seen the tabby she-cat in battle, once at the ThunderClan border and another in the heart of the camp.

Since his Clan ignored him and cast him into the shadows, he'd sought refuge in the comfort that Adderheart and his Clan valued him and the information he'd bring every time they met. Slippaw didn't care that he was betraying his Clan or the warrior code, why should he? His Clanmates didn't care for *him.* They only cared about his older siblings.

As he neared the carrionplace, he quickly picked up the scent of Adderheart, along with two other cats. Those two cats being Echotooth and his brother, Rowantooth. Slippaw smiled to himself and began to walk faster, wanting to get to the carrionplace before the sun dipped below the pine treetops.

"Slippaw," purred the voice of Echotooth, her white fur flashing in the dark green foliage. Her yellow eye flickered to his surroundings and she grinned. "It's so good to see you again."

Slippaw felt relaxed for the first time in over two moons. "It's good to see you too, Echotooth." He purred and twitched his tail. "Where's Adderheart and Rowantooth?"

A rumble from the bushes started the apprentice, but Adderheart and his brother slid out with amused looks on their faces.

"I'm surprised you could tell it was us," Rowantooth commented, his whiskers twitching in amusement.

"It's because you both smell like fox-dung," Echotooth sniffed. "When was the last time you both groomed your pelts?"

Adderheart rolled his ice-blue eyes and rested his gaze warmly on Slippaw. "What's new in ShadowClan?" He asked.

"ThunderClan attacked our camp a while ago and Mistypelt was killed." He began to explain that Lilymist's kits would be made into apprentices soon and he worked his paws against the ground. The she-cat had been killed by Viperstrike because she killed Darkfang.

"Don't worry, Slippaw." Rowantooth yawned, showing his yellow

fangs. "Once Rushstar shows his face to the Clans, we'll take care of ThunderClan."

"That won't be easy," Slippaw pointed out, trying to keep his tone light. "Blizzardstar's announced we aren't going to any Gatherings."

Echotooth scoffed and flicked her tail across Slippaw's flank. "We'll worry about that, don't worry." She looked to the sky, her working eye reflecting the setting sun. "You'd better get back to your Clan before you're absence is noticed."

Slippaw snorted angrily, his claws unsheathing. "My Clanmates hardly notice me when I'm in the camp." He meowed bitterly. "All they do is fuss about Silverpaw and Kestrelpaw."

Adderheart whisked his tail. "They're blind to what you can do, Slippaw." He comforted, his tone slightly hostile. "When they realize they're in the wrong, it'll be too late."

Slippaw looked gratefully around at his friends, glad *some* cats believed in him. *When Rushstar finally shows himself, ShadowClan will pay.*

Chapter Seventeen

Slippaw yawned as he shifted in his nest, trying to fall back asleep. Daylight was slipping through the gaps in the bramble walls of the apprentice den and the crisp air sank into his smoky fur. As his eyes gradually opened, he quickly realized that Silverpaw and Kestrelpaw weren't in their nests. *They're probably on the dawn patrol.* He thought, grateful that he didn't need to be woken up with the usual sneer or snarky remark by his littermates.

Looking outside the den, something glowed at the entrance of the den, white and glistening. *Snow!* Slippaw shot to his feet and hurried to the white powder, awed at the sight. He was born in leafbare, so he knew what snow looked like, but it still made him feel like a kit, still suckling from the curve of his mother's belly. He padded out of the sheltered den, seeing Lilymist's kits taking advantage of the weather and playing freely in the snow. Spotting his mother basking in the sun with her eye on the kits, resentment bubbled in his belly. *If only she paid more attention to me when I was that age.* Slippaw shook out his pelt and headed for the warrior's den, searching for his mentor.

Lightningstreak wasn't in the clearing, so Slippaw ducked inside the den. The warrior's den was much bigger than the apprentice's den, sheltering more cats that were twice the size of a fresh apprentice. Not seeing his mentor anywhere, Slippaw felt more at ease as he slid out of the bramble den. Lightningstreak's mate, Willowsun, was padding toward the nursery, carrying two skinny frogs between her jaws. Her flanks were round with the promise of new kits as she lumbered toward Lilymist.

Sighing, Slippaw headed for the prey pile, which was pitifully small. Choosing a small mouse for himself and a scrawny blackbird for Rainpelt and Pinenose, he carried the prey toward the medicine cat's den and slipped inside soundlessly.

"Rainpelt? Pinenose?" He called, his voice muffled from the prey as he halted at the mouth of the cave.

"Be there in a moment," Pinenose's gentle voice echoed in the den as the sound of her stepping made a soft *pitter padder*.

"I've brought some food," he mewed, padding toward her voice and stopping at what he saw.

Splayed out in a moss nest was Blizzardstar. Her eyes were wide and glazed as she twitched and choked on something. Her paws jerked as her tail bushed out to twice its size.

Slippaw dropped the prey he was carrying and dropped to his knees, staring in shock as his leader spat out a dark substance and shuddered. "Blizzardstar!" He cried.

Pinenose whisked her tail across his mouth and nudged him to the other side of the den. "Keep your voice down," she murmured, casting Blizzardstar a worried and concerned look.

"How long has she been...like that?" Slippaw asked, his voice consumed with worry and fear for his leader. Despite her tyrannic behavior, he still respected the pale ginger leader and would follow her to the end of the world if he was told to.

"About a half-moon." Pinenose let out a weary sigh and twitched her ear. Horror and betrayal washed over the apprentice, startled that the medicine cat apprentice would keep such a thing from the rest of the Clan. "Before you mention anything about the Clan, Snowfall knows."

"But what about the rest of the Clan?" Slippaw was in shock. What if Blizzardstar lost her ninth life and joined StarClan? The Clan wouldn't know how she died!

Pinenose flicked her tail over his ears. "The Clan will know that their leader is ill and has not lost a life," she meowed, her voice stern and sharp.

"You need to tell them!" Slippaw blurted out, unable to hold back the outburst. "The Clan needs to know their leader will be okay!"

"Slippaw," a sharp hiss from the cave entrance made the apprentice's fur bristle. Rainpelt slid into her den, her hazel eyes

flashing. "We do not know if Blizzardstar will be okay. That's why we haven't told the Clan yet."

Slippaw stared at the blue-gray medicine cat. His chest started to fill with outrage as he looked at the spluttering shape of his leader. For the sake of his leader, he lowered his voice to a growl. "Is she going to live?"

Rainpelt shared an unsure look with Pinenose and looked at Slippaw. "We don't know, but we're trying our best." She twitched her tail tip and looked over her shoulder before going on. "Blizzardstar's lost two lives already, the last thing she needs is for her Clan to go berserk."

Slippaw let out a defeated sigh and dropped his head in sadness. "Fine," he growled and pushed by the medicine cats, snatched his mouse, and left the den without another word.

The sun was rising over the camp when Lightningstreak returned to camp. Slippaw wondered why the warrior had left without taking his apprentice with him but decided not to dwell on questioning his mentor. Instead, he padded toward the black tom and twitched his tail.

"What are we going to do today, Lightningstreak?" Slippaw forced himself to sound cheerful, though that was the last feeling he was experiencing.

His mentor hardly looked at him as he shouldered his way to Willowsun. "Do what you want and leave me alone," Lightningstreak growled and Slippaw's fur began to bristle.

"Just like yesterday," Slippaw hissed, anger lacing his voice.

Lightningstreak snapped his head around and he glared at Slippaw, who winced and shrank under his gaze. His lips curled back into a ferocious snarl and Slippaw began to tremble. "Watch your tongue, apprentice," he spat. "It could get you into trouble."

Slippaw dug his claws into the ground and forced himself to meet his mentor's blazing gaze. "It'll be the most interesting thing that

would happen in a moon." He shoved his mentor back and lashed his tail.

The black warrior growled, his claws unsheathing as the rest of the patrol, consisting of Ivyfur and Sheepshadow, awkwardly padded by the arguing cats. "What are you saying, apprentice?"

Slippaw bared his teeth, thrilled at the flare of anger in his mentor's eyes. He was sick and tired of how he constantly ignored his apprentice, instead of trying to spend his time with Willowsun. "You never train me!" He burst out, his ears flattening to his head. "All you do is spend needless time with Willowsun!"

Lightningstreak let out a hiss and glared at his apprentice. "I'm giving the Clan new kits, you arrogant mousebrain!" He spat, his voice scathing.

Slippaw unsheathed his claws and sprang at his mentor, claws extended and paws outstretched. Lightningstreak staggered backward, tripping over his tail and falling onto his back. Slippaw pummeled the black warrior's belly with his paws, slowly staining his claws with blood.

With a shriek of pain and fury, Lightningstreak kicked his apprentice away and scrambled to his paws. "You're insane!" He gasped and swiped at Slippaw's face.

Slippaw hissed as Lightningstreak's claws tore the flesh on his muzzle and he jerked back. "You're a horrible mentor!" He flashed back.

"Slippaw!" The voice of his father snapped him out of his rage. Junipertail leaped at his son, knocking him off his paws and standing firmly in front of Lightningstreak. Slippaw staggered to his feet, his anger bubbling in his chest until he saw the rage in his father's yellow eyes, like fire. "How *dare* you attack one of your Clanmates? Let alone your mentor!"

His father's words sliced through Slippaw's heart and he stumbled back as though Junipertail had struck him. "I-It's not my f-fault!" He retorted, his voice shaking. "He...he doesn't train me!"

Junipertail arched his back and hissed at his son. His ears drew back and he scrunched up his nose. "You are the worst cat in ShadowClan!" He reared on his hind legs and raked his claws across Slippaw's cheek.

Blood welled at the wound and he staggered back. As a few drops of blood dripped into the white snow, he raised his head to glare up at his father. Seasons of resentment and bitterness against his kin filled him from ears to tail tip. He felt nothing but anger, resentment, and a dark flicker of red masked his sight.

Without warning, he shot forward, tackling Junipertail and tossing him onto his side. As his father yelled in surprise, Slippaw dragged his claws down the length of his flank, springing away to avoid his swiping paws.

Junipertail scrambled to his paws and he sank his teeth into Slippaw's sleek tail, pulling him back and sinking his claws into his hindquarters.

Slippaw shrieked in agony and bucked his father off. Whirling around on his paws, he slashed at Junipertail's eyes, before diving under his belly and standing.

Junipertail screeched as he toppled onto his side, looking up at his son in anger and pain. As Slippaw lunged for his belly, Junipertail raised a paw and sloppily sliced his nose. "You're frog-brained!" His father snarled.

Slippaw reared on his hind legs and slammed his front paws onto his father's head. Junipertail's head connected with the ground and gasped in pain. "You've got bees in your brain!" He retorted and prepared to strike his father again before a weight slammed into his side, tossing him away from his father and sending him skidding onto the ground.

"Slippaw!" The voice of the Clan deputy made Slippaw feel dazed as he scrambled quickly to his paws. Snowfall's blue eyes were icicles as Ivyfur and Cherryshadow helped Junipertail to his paws. "What are you doing?"

Slippaw found a lump growing in his throat, preventing him from speaking. *It was all his fault!* He wanted to screech, sending a glare over at his mentor, who was supporting Junipertail on his shoulder. "I..."

Snowfall lashed her tail once, silencing him quickly. Anger bubbled in her eyes and Slippaw shrank back in slight fear. "You *never* attack one of your Clanmates!" She went on. "Especially your own kin."

"It wasn't his fault!" Burst out a voice and Slippaw was shocked as Paleflower and Pinenose stepped forward to stand next to him.

"It's true," the medicine cat apprentice added, pressing supportively against Slippaw's side. "Both Junipertail and Lightningstreak hardly notice Slippaw."

"That's not a good reason to attack a fellow Clanmate!" Growled Spotpelt as he glared at Slippaw mistrustingly.

"Get him out of here!" Cried Willowsun from where she stood with her mate.

"Drive him out of the forest!" Yowled Marshflame.

Slippaw tucked his tail between his hind legs, his injuries starting to sting. *They're turning against me!* He wanted to fall into a hole as his Clan snarled and growled, glaring at him.

"*Silence!*" The frigid voice of a cat behind Slippaw sent chills down his back. Turning around, he saw Adderheart, Echotooth, Rowantooth, and Rushstar stalking into the camp.

The guards, Harepelt and Frostshade, were writhing underneath a silver-gray tom and Fireflower. Harepelt was bleeding from a scratch above his left eye and Frostshade was struggling to get up.

"Who are you?" Snowfall demanded, her fur starting to bristle. "What are you doing in our camp?"

Rushstar rested his orange eyes on Slippaw and he felt uncomfortable. "Release the apprentice," the leader ordered.

For once, Junipertail stood in front of Slippaw, his fur sticking up despite his injuries. "Stay away from my kit!" He spat.

Across the clearing where Lilymist was keeping her kits in check, she let out a surprised mew. "Rushstar!" Junipertail seemed confused as his mate crossed the camp and rubbed against the gray-and-white tom. Behind her, the kits were eagerly charging after her. At the sight of the leader, they sprang and began to climb all over him.

"What is this?" Junipertail demanded, his voice a low growl as he looked from Lilymist to the kits, then to Rushstar. "Get your paws off *my mate* and *my kits*!" He ordered.

Rushstar looked at the tom, his eyes amused as though he was a kit. "You mean *my* mate and *my* kits?" He corrected.

Junipertail was shocked as Lilymist refused to meet her mate's eyes. He took a startled step back and looked around at his Clanmates, eventually, his eyes landed on Slippaw. "D-did you know?" He whispered.

Slippaw stared at his father in utter shock. Before he could speak, Rowantooth sprang onto Junipertail's back and shoved him to the ground. The black tom yowled as the cream tabby tom raked his claws across his shoulder.

Slippaw watched in horror as Junipertail was flipped onto his back, belly exposed as he stared up at his son, eyes fearful and pleading. *He wants me to help him!* Realization washed over him in a catastrophic wave, making him stagger. His paws froze to the ground, preventing him from doing anything.

In one swift dive, Rowantooth tore Junipertail's throat out, looking triumphant. Junipertail yowled in agony before it was cut short and he fell still.

Slippaw felt an icy wave of satisfaction crash over him at the sight of his dead father. His claws sheathed and unsheathed as he lifted his gaze to meet Rushstar's orange gaze.

"Junipertail!" Silverpaw's agonized wail made Slippaw look over his shoulder to see his brother and sister pressed against each other, trembling uncontrollably.

Serves you right, he thought bitterly, reflecting back several moons. *Our parents only cared about you two. Not me.* He lifted his head and let out a triumphant yowl, joined in by the other DarkClan warriors.

"Slippaw." Blizzardstar's weak voice startled the apprentice, but he didn't turn around in case she sprang at him, claws unsheathed. "What's going on?"

Slippaw didn't reply as he whipped around and leaped at the leader, paws outstretched. He was quickly intercepted as Snowfall sank her teeth into his tail and yanked him back.

In an instant, Snowfall fell beneath the silver-gray tom, a paw at her neck. His teeth glittered as he lunged for her throat, and Slippaw had to force himself to look away as the deputy shrieked in agony.

Rushstar watched in cold interest as Snowfall screeched, the silver-gray tom's teeth fastened in her throat as she tried to desperately claw him off. "Kill her," he ordered coldly.

Slippaw looked around at his stunned Clanmates. The cats who devoted their lives defending their Clan with claw and tooth were now gazing at the DarkClan cats with wide, fearful eyes.

"Snowfall!" Blizzardstar crumbled to the ground, her eyes wide as her faithful deputy twitched and jerked before she lay still. The Clan leader glared up at Rushstar, who was licking his claws. "What do you want, Rushspring?"

Rushstar rested his cool orange gaze on the other leader. "Rush*star*, Blizzardstar." He corrected and went on. "And I only want a few things from you."

Blizzardstar bared her teeth. "What is that?" She spat.

Rushstar swept his fire-like gaze across the entire Clan and Slippaw realized he was searching for someone. "All of my spies, come

forward." He meowed.

To Slippaw's surprise, several cats stepped forward. Cherryshadow, Spotpelt, Ivyfur, and Pinenose padded toward the DarkClan leader and stood alongside the other warriors.

"Pinenose!" Rainpelt cried, her hazel eyes wide and shocked. "What are you doing?"

The medicine cat apprentice bowed her head and replied. "I-I'm tired of being in ShadowClan." She meowed honestly and Slippaw's eyes widened. "Treating cats is something that doesn't inspire me anymore." She shrugged.

Rushstar blinked smugly at Blizzardstar, who glared at the warriors. "We'll be leaving now," he meowed calmly. "This isn't the last you see of DarkClan, Blizzardstar." Spinning on his heels, he flicked his tail and led his Clanmates out of the camp.

Slippaw watched them go before turning around to look at his Clanmates. He'd served alongside them for seasons and it was all he'd ever known. Puffing out his chest, he turned around and followed the DarkClan cats.

Chapter Eighteen

Slippaw opened his eyes to see Cherryshadow standing in front of him. Hastily, he got to his paws and shook out his fur, dislodging any scraps of moss that clung to his pelt.

"Rushstar has called a Clan meeting," the former ShadowClan warrior meowed.

Slippaw followed her into the camp clearing, blanching at the sight of the ThunderClan cat, Applefrost sitting outside the nursery. He knew she was the mother of Viperpaw, but he wondered why she was exiled from her Clan.

"Cats of DarkClan!" Slippaw raised his head to look up at his new leader. Rushstar was perched on a fallen tree, his eyes glittering. "The Gathering is in a few days and since ShadowClan now knows of us, I've decided that we should make ourselves known to the rest of the Clans."

Many yowls of agreement greeted the DarkClan leader, the loudest coming from the deputy, Starlinglight. According to Rushstar, who had been Starlinglight's Clanmate before leading DarkClan, he'd been made leader and prepared for a battle before being driven out from the former leader, Rainfall.

Rushstar drank in the yowling and flicked his tail to silence his Clan. "Before then, I must direct your attention to an apprentice who has served us for moons." Suddenly, his eyes rested on Slippaw. "Slippaw, come forward." When he complied, the tom went on. "I, Rushstar, leader of DarkClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has worked hard to understand the ways of your noble code and I condemn him as a warrior in turn."

Slippaw heard murmuring behind him but he ignored it. Flexing his

claws, he held Rushstar's gaze.

"Slippaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Rushstar asked.

Slippaw raised his chin and spoke loudly. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Slippaw, from this moment on you will be known as Slipclaw. StarClan honors your courage and ferocity and we welcome you as a full warrior of DarkClan." Rushstar jerked his muzzle and Slipclaw dipped his head.

Trying not to be the center of attention, Slipclaw slunk back into the crowd, sitting next to Cherryshadow and Spotpelt. He looked up at Rushstar, who remained perched on the Fallen Tree.

"I have another announcement." Rushstar flicked his tail and at once the Clan fell silent. "There is one Clan that we must target more than the others. ThunderClan must crumble!"

Slipclaw yowled in support of his leader, feeling his claws unsheathe and dig into the ground. A wicked grin spread across Rushstar's face before he dismissed the Clan.

"Slipclaw!" Condorpaw's voice made the tom turn around as the large black apprentice trotted toward him. "Lilymist wants to see you."

Slipclaw flicked his ear and the tom padded away. Annoyance clawed at his chest as he headed for the nursery. Although she was his mother, Lilymist gave him as much attention as a dead blade of grass. Ducking into the nursery, he saw his mother waiting for him in a moss nest.

"You wanted to see me?" He meowed, flicking his tail as he sat down.

Lilymist shifted her paws and nodded. "I know Junipertail's death has hardly affected you," she meowed carefully and Slipclaw snorted. "I've known your alliance with Rushstar since you've

started leaving the ShadowClan camp at random."

Slipclaw couldn't hold back a snide comment. "And you decided to join him? Some warrior you are."

Lilymist seemed pained from his comment but she went on. "The point is, I'm sorry for not paying as much attention to you as you deserve." Her ears flattened and she didn't meet her son's eyes. "Slipclaw, I really am proud of you. I just didn't know how to be a mother when you and your littermates were born."

Hot rage flooded through Slipclaw and he bared his teeth at Lilymist, who shrank back in her nest. "That didn't stop you from smothering Sliverpaw and Kestrelpaw with attention." He growled.

Lilymist looked away and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Slipclaw's claws slid out and he felt himself tremble with anger. "'Sorry' fills no bellies," he spat and whirled on his heels, stalking out of the den as his tail lashed behind him.

In the clearing, Tumblepaw and Frostpaw were practicing hunting crouches and Peakpaw, Condorpaw, and Raggedpaw were sharing tongues by their den. Amberpaw caught his eye and blinked at her older brother, before turning around and padding to join her littermates.

Bitterness rose in his throat but he shook out his pelt. *I hope the Gathering comes quickly.* He thought darkly, casting a disdainful look at the camp entrance. *Every Clan will pay. Starting with ThunderClan!*

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Slipclaw stalked through the territory DarkClan claimed. It was a mix between ShadowClan's pine forest and ThunderClan's oak forest. The Gathering was in a few days and Slipclaw's paws itched to see the looks on the other Clans' faces when they saw DarkClan.

His mind wandered as he thought to Viperpaw. Surely she'd had her warrior name by now. What could it be? Viperheart? Viperclaw? Viperleaf? He shuddered at the thought of her having a soft name

like Viperleaf. *With the way she fights, I'd say Viperclaw.* Slipclaw flattened his ears. *Maybe because my name ends with claw.* He forced the thought away as the rest of the patrol, consisting of Spotpelt, Cherryshadow, and Condorpaw padded behind him.

"What are we looking for, again?" Cherryshadow asked, walking quicker to match his strides.

Slipclaw flicked his ear without looking at her. "We're looking for a bunch of loners and rogues," he replied. "Rushstar wants more cats in the Clan, and we're going to find him the best."

Cherryshadow snorted, her whiskers twitching. "We already took in that ThunderClan scum, Applefrost. And she didn't even put up a fight when she was kicked out of ThunderClan!"

Slipclaw blinked and flicked his tail. "She would've been ripped to shreds," he pointed out, casting the green-eyed tortoiseshell.

Behind them, Slipclaw heard Spotpelt scoff. "It would've been better for us if she'd died." The menace and hatred in the tom's voice made a small sliver of doubt worm its way into his belly. "She just mopes around, wasting prey and space."

Condorpaw piped up. "I think she's expecting kits by how fat she is!"

Slipclaw whirled around and glared at the black apprentice, scowling with narrowed eyes. Condorpaw flinched back at the sight of Slipclaw's bared teeth. As Slipclaw towered over the apprentice, he swung his head around and kept stalking through the forest.

It wasn't long until Cherryshadow spoke again, her voice alert. "Slipclaw," she nudged him and nodded to the left.

Slipclaw followed her gaze and he spotted a rather large dusty brown tabby tom padding in the undergrowth. Crouching down, he signaled his patrol to do the same and he slipped after the tom.

The way the cat held himself told Slipclaw that he wasn't a kittypet, and the scars on his flank and nicks in his ears proved that fact. *He looks like a rogue.* Slipclaw shot a warning glance at his patrol and rose to his full height before padding toward the tom.

The loner noticed him at once and he turned, eyes light yellow eyes narrowed and teeth bared into a snarl. "Who are you?" He demanded, tail lashing. "What do you want?"

Slipclaw gave the tom a once-over and struggled to keep his claws sheathed. He dipped his head, his eyes never leaving the tom's. "My name is Slipclaw," he meowed, watching the tom go rigid. "I'm a warrior of DarkClan. Who are you?"

The tom eyed him warily. "My name is Hawk," he replied, his voice edged with hostility. "There's not a Clan named DarkClan."

Slipclaw raised an eyebrow at the loner. "There is now," he responded and twitched his whiskers. His eyes rested on the scars along his flank. "Seen a battle or two?"

Hawk forced his fur to lie flat and nodded stiffly. "I've seen some battles in my day," he narrowed his eyes. "I smell three other cats." Looking passed Slipclaw, he called out. "Come out!"

Slipclaw, keeping his gaze steady, flicked his tail and heard the rest of his patrol emerge from the bushes. "These are my Clanmates. Cherryshadow, Spotpelt, and Condorpaw."

Hawk grunted. "Three warriors and an apprentice makes some patrol," his eyes flicked to Cherryshadow and they narrowed. "You're Clanmates with Mistypelt, aren't you?"

Cherryshadow's dark green eyes widened. "She-she's dead," she mumbled, looking away.

Hawk's eyes widened until they were the size of full-moons. "Who killed her?" With a growl, he added. "Was it Vinepaw?"

Slipclaw lashed his tail, preventing Cherryshadow from speaking. "I don't know who Vinepaw is," he meowed. "But she was killed by Viperpaw."

Hawk closed his eyes, as though remembering old memories. "Do you know a cat named Scarredbelly?" He asked. When Slipclaw nodded, he went on. "That's my son. His mate, Applefrost, is Viperpaw's mother."

It was Slipclaw's turn to widen his eyes. "Who are you?" He asked, before adding hastily. "I mean, who *were* you?"

Hawk's probing eyes made Slipclaw uncomfortable, but he forced himself to hold his gaze. "My name used to be Hawkpelt, the former deputy of ThunderClan." His lip curled. "Before Rainstar stripped it away from me."

Spotpelt spoke up. "Rainfall isn't ThunderClan's leader now," he meowed. "She stepped down."

Hawk's claws dug into the dirt. "Dumb cat," he hissed and lifted his head. "What are you doing here, Slipclaw?"

The tom dipped his head. "Would you like to join DarkClan?" Before Hawk could question further, he added. "We're going to destroy the Clans. Starting with ThunderClan."

Hawk's light yellow eyes glowed like the stars of Silverpelt and he dipped his head. "It would be an honor."

Epilogue

The moon hung lazily over Jumpstar's head as he led his Clan toward the Gathering Hollow. They'd just crossed the tree bridge over the lake and were weaving through the trees that sheltered the mice and squirrels that were forbidden from hunting.

To his right, his deputy, Appletail, tasted the air. "ThunderClan and SkyClan are here," she commented with a glance at Jumpstar. "No scent of ShadowClan."

Jumpstar blinked warmly at his deputy. "Maybe they're just running late." He suggested and pressed on, hearing Sunstorm, Foxblaze, and Spruceheart talking behind him.

The voice of a SkyClan warrior ahead of them made Jumpstar lift his head. "WindClan is here!"

Appletail purred and bounded off to join the other deputies, while Jumpstar strode toward Beetlestar of ThunderClan and Amberstar of SkyClan. Dipping his head to the other leaders, he sat down next to Amberstar.

"ShadowClan and RiverClan should be here soon," purred the SkyClan leader as she looked kindly at the two toms.

Beetlestar shivered in his short tortoiseshell pelt. "They'd better," he meowed. "I'm freezing!"

Jumpstar purred with amusement at the young leader and looked up at the night sky. It was relatively clear, with little to no clouds. "Seems like it'll be a clear night," he commented, looking at the other leaders.

Amberstar nodded and stiffened, sniffing the air. "ShadowClan has arrived," she meowed, turning around to watch the shadowy cats spilled into the clearing.

Instantly, a buzz of uncertainty for the shadowed cats swept through the island and Jumpstar couldn't help but notice something off about the ShadowClan warriors. Their leader, Blizzardstar, held an air of confusion as she clawed her way up the tree and steadied herself on the branch with Beetlestar.

The tortoiseshell tom was the first to speak. "Greetings, Blizzardstar." He meowed, dipping his head respectfully.

Blizzardstar looked up from her paws and gazed at the leaders with an almost dazed look in her hazel eyes. When she looked away, Amberstar tilted her head.

"Get enough sleep last night, Bliz?" She asked, her voice concerned.

When the ShadowClan leader hardly reacted, Jumpstar began to worry. *Is she ill?* "Blizzardstar?" He meowed, shifting his weight onto his haunches and leaping to the branch she was sitting on. Still, she didn't look up. "Are you alright?"

"I'll tell you all when the Gathering begins," she mumbled and Jumpstar pressed worriedly against her.

"RiverClan is here!" Jumpstar looked up at Featherwind's call and saw Creekstar striding toward them, his head held high with pride.

As the RiverClan leader made his way toward the tree, as he was climbing up it, there was another shout from the gathered cats.

"Who's that?" It was Honeyspirit, and her voice sounded alarmed and on the verge of a growl.

"Outsiders!" Hissed Amberlight, RiverClan's deputy.

Out of all the hisses, a shout came from the ThunderClan cats. "Rushspring!" It was Scarredbelly. The horribly scarred tom was standing in front of his daughter, Viperstrike, his fur fluffed up to twice its size. He was glaring at the gray-and-white tom with orange eyes.

Rushspring waved his tail in acknowledgment of the tom's call and clambered up the tree with ease, settling onto the branch above the

other leaders. "DarkClan is here," he meowed humbly, looking calmly at the other leaders.

Amberstar curled her lip. "That's not a real Clan!" She snarled, her claws scratched against the bark.

Jumpstar narrowed his eyes at the tom, his tail curling around Blizzardstar. *This is what she meant,* he thought. *Rushspring's arrival.* "What are you doing here, Rushspring?" He demanded, trying to keep his mew steady as he looked up at the so-called DarkClan tom. "You're exiled from ThunderClan."

Rushspring regarded him with cold orange eyes, making his pelt prickle. "My name is Rushstar, Jumpstar." He corrected, his voice cool and calm. "And I am the leader of DarkClan."

Finally, Blizzardstar spoke, her voice a snarl. "DarkClan is *not* one of the five Clans." She spun on her heels, nearly knocking Jumpstar off the branch before Beetlestar grabbed him to keep him steady.

Rushstar looked at the ShadowClan leader with an amused and taunting gleam in his eyes. "Are you still upset some of your warriors left?" He sneered.

Jumpstar watched the fur along her spine ripple and he rested his tail along her back. "Let's just get on with the Gathering," he murmured in her ear and turned around, slightly uneasy with Rushstar behind him. "WindClan has three new apprentices! Blazepaw, Flarepaw, and Irispaw!"

Murmurs of congratulations for the three apprentices rippled through the clearing, but most of the cats stayed silent, casting mistrustful looks at their DarkClan rivals.

As the Gathering went on, the leaders went, but Rushstar insisted he go last. Jumpstar felt every hair on his pelt prickle with anxiety at the thought of having six Clans living around the lake. He risked a glance at Amberstar and Beetlestar, who looked just as displeased. *Prey will be even harder to find during leafbare.* He thought.

At long last, it was Rushstar's turn. "DarkClan has a lot of news," he

meowed. "We have two new warriors, nine new Clanmates, and seven new apprentices." Rushstar looked at the other leaders and added. "I must warn you all about us. We reside next to ShadowClan and ThunderClan and are struggling to feed our growing Clan. We would greatly appreciate it if you shared some of your land with us."

Right away, a chorus of outraged yowls erupted from the gathered cats and Rushstar silenced them with a flick of his slim tail. "DarkClan has rights to the land just like all of you. ThunderClan and ShadowClan have enough prey, why not share for the well-being of another Clan?"

"Because you're all traitors!" Scarredbelly had leaped to his paws, glaring hatefully at Rushstar. "Have you all not forgotten Rushstar killed to become more powerful?"

Rushstar narrowed his eyes at the warrior. "Brother, you cling to the past like moss to a rotten tree." He meowed. "You need to learn and let go."

Scarredbelly's eyes grew as cold as ice. He lashed his tail, but sat down and glared up at the leader.

Blizzardstar spoke without looking at Rushstar. "I will give you a portion of our territory, Rushstar." She meowed, her tail tip twitching. "From the border we share with the edge of the Twolegplace to the ThunderClan border will be yours. That's it."

Rushstar looked satisfied and he nodded. "I think this concludes this moon's Gathering." He decided and leaped down from the tree in one jump. "DarkClan! We're leaving."

As the new Clan left, anxious meows came from the other five Clans.

Creekstar stepped forward and yowled. "Be quiet!" Once the Clans quieted down, he continued. "We must learn to manage how to live alongside DarkClan. However, we mustn't give up hope that StarClan will help us through this."

Amberstar nodded. "We have to get through this together," she agreed and looked at the other leaders. "I say we send messengers once every quarter-moon to see if DarkClan is causing trouble."

Jumpstar flicked his tail, looking up at the sky. "Until then, we must keep our faith in StarClan that they willed this to happen." He meowed. "WindClan, we're leaving." Leaping down from the branch, he was swallowed by his Clanmates and he shuffled toward the moor.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Creekstar, Amberstar, Beetlestar, and Blizzardstar watching him with sympathy in their eyes. Forcing himself to look away, Jumpstar trudged on. *StarClan, please don't let this be a bad omen.*